sacatela (second-person limited)

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sacatela (second-person limited)

by channaro

Summary

"Wanna see my act?" The boy gleefully produced a swath of playing cards from nowhere. "It's a game called Follow The Lady—this here is the Queen of Hearts, and I'm gonna make her disappear. It's *your job to find her again."*

Things said and unsaid and a secret third thing in between. Told by a perfectly reliable narrator.

Notes

Sacatela: take that love out of your head before it drives you crazy.

Chapter 1: follow the lady

Chapter Summary

> ***"Follow the Lady,"*** *also known as "Three Card Monté," is a confidence game in which the marks are tricked into betting that they can find the designated "Lady" among three face-down playing cards.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When you are nine years old you meet a magician.

It was a simple mission dispatch: lure the target behind the plaster circus tent and quietly snap his neck. *Check*. Dismember the body according to the specifications of the client. *Check*. Leave no witnesses—

Mission fail.

You feel him before you see him; a boy, not much older than you, leaning against the circus tent to your right. His sudden presence catches you off guard, and that deep, humiliating instinct you haven't yet shaken kicks into gear. *Fight, flight, or—*

You freeze in place. The scene plays out before you: the awkwardly splayed corpse, a handful of needles still clutched between your fingers, dried blood clinging to the hem of your kimono. Even the most oblivious of bystanders would come to the obvious conclusion.

The sole witness to your crime pops his chewing gum with a lazy smile.

"New act?"

You say nothing.

"You had something against Antonio?" The bystander blows out another bubble. "He usually pays new hires shit, but there are other ways to make a buck around here.”

The bubble popped.

"He’s only sleeping," you try.

"Oho, yeah?" The boy's laughter is heavy with mockery. "I'll bet he's real comfortable, napping with a broken neck an' all."

"Perhaps you ought to give it a try," you bite back before you can think better of it.

"Is that an offer?"

The boy cleans the strings of gum off of his surprisingly white teeth. He licks his lips, looking you up and down with an appraising eye.

"Betcha you could pass as a doll with that face— all pretty and porcelain. Not to mention your hair in that funny little bob... is this your usual look? Or is the whole," he lazily waves his hand up and down, "Kokeshi-doll style something you reserve exclusively for murder sprees?"

You bite down a retort to the well-worn jibe. You dress this way and look this way because you are your mother's son, and it is nothing to be ashamed of. You wear whatever finery is picked out for you and sit perfectly still as Mother runs a fine-toothed comb through your hair, until every stand lays perfectly in place.

This boy looks positively ragged by comparison: tattered clothes, scrawny build, pale ginger hair greasy and unwashed. There's a patch on his scalp where it looks like someone grabbed a fistful and ripped it out. He is ugly in a sharp kind of way, hard to look away from.

"Wanna see my act, doll?" The boy gleefully produced a swath of playing cards from nowhere. "It's a game called *'Follow The Lady.'* See the Queen of Hearts? I'm gonna make her disappear. It's your job to find her again."

A needle flies from your hand before the magician's grin can finish plotting its course across his face.

The needle is (predictably) intercepted by said Queen of Hearts— the point of it embedded somewhere between Her Majesty's eyes. The boy doesn't waste time, throwing the whole deck of cards in the air; by the time they finish fluttering to the ground the magician has disappeared.

You think you still feel him, out of sight, watching and waiting to see what you'll do next.

Today, you'll choose to disappoint. An assassin's job is to always go unnoticed, to never leave an imprint on the ground you walk. You are less than a shadow, and have no desire whatsoever to follow this man into the blinding, obtrusive stage lights.

When you get home, you will request Mother's permission to cut your hair.

Chapter End Notes

so the thing about this fic is that its been in my drafts for way too long, and before that it was in my docs, and before that it was in my notesapp, and I realized eventually I'm just gonna have to get to it and post the damn thing. its one of those like writing exercise prompts you start and then oops a few thousand words later a plot happens. originally it

was gonna be oneshot but there are these huge gaps that still need to be filled in and maybe posting it in mini-chapters will motivate me enough to buckle down and finish it.

but I do have each chapter drafted (or at least mapped out) so maybe I can maintain a weekly update schedule? that would be crazy. chapters will vary in length from a few hundred words to a few thousand. I have the first three ready to go, and since they're each pretty short, I'm posting them all at once (wow!) and I'll see y'all again next Sunday!

(also yes every chapter will be named after a card trick/game because gimmick be gimmicking)

Chapter 2: second dealings

Chapter Summary

> ***"Second dealing"*** *(also known as dealing seconds) is a method of manipulating a deck of cards during a card game by way of dealing the second, rather than the top card of the deck. This is usually done for the purpose of cheating.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You see him again just a few years later- but you're not sure he sees you. You are on the roof of a building opposite the Claire de Lux; one of the largest venues in all of Yorknew and current host to your target. The base floor is all glass, the building shaped like a narrow pyramid. It's tacky, but you're grateful for the wide visibility; you're able to watch your target from afar and avoid the crowded security of the ballroom.

Your target is at the center of the storm. Judd Tresler, an absurdly wealthy billionaire who came from a line of equally absurd billionaires. He has been married for four years now, and his wife now wants him dead.

"An accident," she had requested, "It should look like an accident. But make it painful." You don't know her motives and it's not your place to wonder. You simply execute the client's wishes.

Tresler toasts the group he is dining with and jovially calls for another drink. He is winding down now; it's been a long evening, and soon he will withdraw to his suite upstairs. The perfect place to die; private, clean, secure enough to cast doubt on accusations of foul play. You really couldn't ask for more. Tresler laughs, a big belly laugh that seems to swell across the room, infecting others with his joy, drawing them into his center at the eye of the storm.

Outside the warm lights of the ballroom it is raining; you've been crouching long enough that the water seeping into your shoes has completely numbed the feeling in your toes. It's imperative to remain perfectly still- in the dark, movement alone is enough to draw attention. But just this once, you break protocol to carefully pull back the wet hair that's been sticking to your face and blocking your periphery.

That's when you see the magician again.

He's appeared on the arm of a woman who looks about twice his age, slinking through the crowd and unmoved by the tidal wave of joviality. He has cleaned up: hair combed and gelled, a darker ginger now, face painted pale and devoid of dirt. But the way he moves is coiled, predatory, like a well-behaved lion in a field of sheep. You stay perfectly still and hope that he doesn't sniff you out.

Thankfully, that is the moment your target decides to excuse himself. You track Tresler's movements to the elevator and watch the lights turn on through the massive windows of his suite. This is the part where you sneak through the window and bash his head into the marble floor, making it look like a nasty fall after a heavy night of drinking, as per the client's wishes. But you don't move. Numbness spreads through your body, and it's not the rain anymore because the magician's eyes are now roving around the ballroom downstairs, and he doesn't see you but you're sure he feels you; he *knows* another predator has found its way into his hunting grounds. You stay very, very still because you cannot allow this job to get messy. You are fourteen years old and well past the point of being afforded mistakes. You crouch in the rain for forty-three minutes, one eye on your snoring target in his room and one on the magician. You assume that his boredom overtook any curiosity when he and the woman make their exit.

This teaches you an important lesson. You have cultivated an essential skill that the magician has not: *patience*. Clearly, he lacks the discipline to see things through. Should you meet again- unlikely, you hope- you must keep this in mind.

Your target dies as intended and you go home wet and numb.

Chapter End Notes

the thing about hisoillu is that i'm obsessed with them not being the center of each other's lives, having no reason to continue to gravitate towards each other, but doing it anyway. like there is no reasonable excuse for you to be crazy about this man. your first meeting wasn't particularly special, and neither is he, and neither are you. you're both just. insane.

Chapter 3: the sphinx principle

Chapter Summary

> ***"The Sphinx Principle:"*** *the concept that two mirrors at 90 degrees and with their apex facing the audience can be used to reflect the side curtains or walls, thus enabling an object to be hidden behind the mirrors.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Introductions are made when you are nineteen. It is the second time he has compromised an ongoing job, and it seems now that your luck has run out because everything goes spectacularly wrong.

The fault was somewhat yours-- at least initially. You were underprepared, and had failed to adequately research your target: a critical mistake. Nen users are most dangerous when they've gone undetected. You weren't expecting a man as unassuming as Nero de Ponta, a wealthy but aging tradesmen, to even have *knowledge* of nen-- much less the ability to use it. The sly old man is clearly more prepared for assassination than you thought; he blinds you momentarily with a burst of light from his palms and leaps over the bodies of his guards to flee.

Your client had not even indicated any knowledge of nen, merely stating that Nero was a dangerous man. After a flurry of jobs that had kept you busy non-stop for the past two weeks, your exhausted mind took this to mean his danger came from wealth and connections- the usual businessman portfolio. Now you're beginning to wonder if there was something more to the job you'd shrugged onto the end of your schedule as a throwaway bonus.

One thing you've learned over the many years working in this business, is that the client doesn't always have a reason. They may be a jealous lover, a vengeful mafioso, a spurned wife, or a rival businessman– but sometimes assassination it is nothing more than one man exercising power over another.

The Zoldycks are not serial killers, and don't take such jobs on nothing more than a whim. Even still, sometimes you wonder: what is the fundamental reason for one human being wishing death upon another?

The truth, as you see it, is that murder is inherently unreasonable. There's never really any *decent* justification for wanting a person dead badly enough to empty one's coffers. But there isn't anything point to holding back, either. The trick is knowing it all means nothing. Pretending to have noble intentions in the business of assassination is both foolish and misguided. The blood on your hands needs no justification.

No one is entitled to life--but all are beholden to death.

You shake your head to clear it of the murk. On to the problem at hand: if your target reaches the east wing of the mansion, he'll be lost to you. The reanimated corpse of a guard spoke haltingly about how his boss had used emitter techniques to transform several valuable mirrors into portals, with each leading to a different and random location across the continent. You can be certain that should he escape, you will have a great deal of trouble tracking him again.

You clench your jaw. Exhaustion and shock had slowed your reaction time, and now you have quite possibly ruined what should have been an easy mission. Your target knows his mansion's twists and turns better than you; your best bet is to cut straight across to the Hall of Mirrors and seal off his exit.

With that in mind, you climb out the window and jump to the roof, running straight across towards the east wing. You are *almost* certain the Hall is on the top floor, but you can't help wishing you'd studied the blueprints of your targets mansion a bit more carefully. You can't afford a miscalculation.

Reaching out with your *nen* reveals a glimmer of hastily applied *īn*. There's no time to waste; a well-placed axe-kick to the roof should get you through. You're no enhancer, but over two decades of Zoldyck training has its benefits.

But, as it seems, even a Zoldyck can miscalculate. A slight overextension of your leg applies more force to the roof than you'd intended. It shatters entirely: your third blunder of the evening.

Still-- all is not lost. When the rubble settles, you find yourself in what remains of the fabled Hall of Mirrors. It seems that, in your first stroke of luck all day, the mirrors had all been splintered from the falling rubble. Unintentional or not, the resulting destruction has effectively cut off your target's means of escape.

...Which, as it turns out, is completely unnecessary because your target lies dead a few feet before you.

This is the good news.

The bad news is that you are not the one who killed him. Behind the corpse stands the magician, bloody card in hand, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

"You killed my target," you say, hoping none of the petulance you feel leaks into your tone.

"You are so very welcome." He replies in a low, purring voice. You feel a spike of irritation. It's the first time you have heard him speak in over a decade, and his arrogant cadence remains completely unchanged.

He is staring at you now like he expects something. You realize, with a start, that he wants an introduction.

His eyes show absolutely no recognition of the past. He doesn't know why you're here. He doesn't know *you*.

This is good, you reason. You can work with this. You take in the destruction of the room and the magician's place in it: clearly he had only just walked through the door before you brought the place down. He's dressed in a cheap golden shirt with a low neckline– scandalously low, as your mother would say– and a pair of white pants sitting loosely around his hips. Some kind of houndstooth pattern on the side, the same gaudy gold. A chain, also gold, loops around his waist to complete the costume. He is barefoot. Eyes drunk and heavy-lidded with sleep, makeup smeared. He obviously didn't mean to be here.

He didn't mean to be here.

"Are you a guest?" You wager, hoping you've come to the right conclusion. He smirks.

"Something like that."

"I see."

The conversation falls flat. He is still staring expectantly at you. You fight the absurd urge to clench your hands.

"And this," you gesture at your target's body, asking for confirmation you don't really need, "Would be your work?"

"I'd hardly call it work," he leers, toeing aside Nero's corpse. "He was running through the halls screaming, waving around a gun. Tried to shoot me on sight. I'd say that's a good case for self-defense, no?"

You nod for lack of anything better to do. He seems to be taking stock of you as well. You wonder what it is men like him see when they look at you. Years and years ago, he called you a doll. Pretty, he'd said. Porcelain. You started growing your hair back out, and it's pulled back in a severe updo– paying homage to your mother– and you're still wearing the dress you'd borrowed from her to infiltrate Nero's gala. On jobs like this, it's almost always easier to move around as a woman. The fairer sex, consistently underestimated.

Under the magician's scrutiny, you find yourself wishing you'd worn a suit. There is an arsenal of barbs for him to pull from: and while you don't particularly care what he thinks of you, it will be hard to maintain composure if you have to endure the same honeyed disrespect as last time.

He's saying something now, you realize, lurching out of your head and back into the present.

"...you, on the other hand, seem to be all business. I might have mistaken you for a whore, you know, had you not brought down the building just now."

You'll kill him you'll kill him you'll kill hi—

"Settle down!" He laughs. "I'm sure you're very well-paid either way."

“I don’t get paid if someone *else* kills my target,” you hiss through gritted teeth.

“Oh, what a shame!” He’s still laughing at you– “What if you just take the credit for this one anyway? I certainly won’t tell. It's not as if I had any intention of seeing the man again after last night.”

Despite your better judgment, you consider the offer. You’re tired, low on *nen*, you’ve probably pulled a muscle in your calf and you want to get this job over with so that you can finally go home. But you’re not gullible.

“What would it cost me?”

His lips stretch thin across his smile. He’s sizing you up still, deciding what to do with you.

“Well, let’s say… if I were to ever be in need of your services," He licks his lips and you catch the innuendo. “… Perhaps you would consider waiving my first fee. After that, our debts are cleared. I give, you take. You give, I take. Capiche?”

The muscle in your leg throbs, as you feel a vein in your forehead jump. This is, by all accounts, a terrible idea.

“Forty percent discount.”

“Seventy.”

“Fifty.”

“Sixty-nine.”

You narrow your eyes. “Sixty, and I’ll go no higher.”

He’s closing in on you now. He’s taller than you, his shoulders broader, his figure taking up more and more space in your vision.

“Deal.” He whispers throatily. His voice is deeper than you remember-- makes sense, seeing as how it's been ten years, but something about the timber is enough to send a slight chill through you. His hand reaches out to shake yours.

“Name's Hisoka, by the way. What do I call you?”

“Illumi.” You omit your surname– nothing good can come from him knowing any more about you than necessary– but even so, your given name feels like it gets stuck in your throat as it comes up. *Bad idea bad idea bad idea–*

Your bed. At home. Your bed at home.

“Illumi,” he says, tasting it. Your name sounds obscene on his tongue, like an expletive.

“Hisoka.” You push as much disgust into the word as you can and shake his hand. You almost expect him to pull out a card from his enormously bulbous sleeves and shake it in front of

your face, taunting *follow the lady!* To your great relief, he does nothing of the sort.

No recognition of the past.

“Pleasure doing business with you," the magician says, and disappears. You are left alone with a corpse and a thousand reflections bouncing back at you.

Chapter End Notes

a little amuse bouche for you all, my wonderful beautiful freaks. see you next week!

Chapter 4: beggar-my-neighbor

Chapter Summary

> ***"Beggar-My-Neighbour:"*** *also known as "Beat-Your-Neighbour", "Beat-Jack-Out-Of-Doors", or "Strip-Jack-Naked", is a simple card game involving two stacks of cards. It is somewhat similar in nature to the game War, and has spawned the more complicated variant, Egyptian ratscrew.*

Chapter Notes

> haha pretend this isn't one day late. oops. finals have genuinely made me lose track of the date

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hisoka cashes in later than expected. Part of you had hoped that the magician, flighty as he was, had forgotten about your agreement entirely. You've received a few stray texts from him over the past 18 months soliciting your 'company,' to which you remind him that you are a professional and *will* block his number if he continues to interfere with your work. You do actually block him once, but receive a text a week later that reads simply: *New phone ;)* ♧♤

You don't respond, but you never quite get around to blocking him again.

The era of cryptic texting doesn't last forever. He calls you out of the blue one day; and, since it's Hisoka, of course he manages to catch you at a bad time. You're speeding down the narrow road of a mountain pass in the very nice car of the very nice man you'd just killed. Your phone automatically connects to the car's bluetooth, and his voice worms its way through the front speakers.

"I need someone dead," Hisoka says, foregoing preamble for once in his life. He must really be trying to get on your good side.

"Well then, you're in luck."

"Oh? Do you know a guy?"

"Several. Would you like me to provide you with a recommendation?"

"Hm, no thanks. I already have someone in mind. A seventy percent discount is too tempting an offer to pass up."

“Sixty,” you correct automatically.

He’s just teasing you, you try to remind yourself. *Keep your composure. Give nothing away.*

“I’m just teasing,” he says, as if reading your thoughts. “Although I’m happy to know I made such an impression.”

You don’t mention that the evening at Nero de Ponta’s house was not your first meeting, and whatever 'impression' the magician left had long since been cemented in your memory. You don’t mention that while Hisoka made an impression on you, you've has made none in return. You don't mention that the thought of it churns your stomach a bit.

Instead you say, “I keep my appointments.”

A siren blares from behind you, a timely reminder. You adjust the rearview mirror to see two trucks closing in you. They’ve been poorly disguised as commercial vehicles, commandeered by two men in equally transparent disguises. The Swardani mafia was really falling behind these days. Alongside them was a police car, which you suspect is also property of the mafia. Old dogs, old tricks.

The current underboss of Swardini city's largest and oldest crime syndicate, was a man named Henry Chant: a young, up-and-coming idealist with the naive aspirations of a reformation. He wanted to make their seedy organization into something that could keep order in Swardini City, 'without imposing unnecessary cruelty on its citizens.' It goes without saying that the current boss-- and the old guard who served them-- were not exactly receptive to this change.

Still, they couldn't make a move on their own ranks without splitting the organization halfway down the middle; not to mention the fact that a full-on gang war would stir up the city's other well established families. Bad for business.

So, here's where you come in: a third-party assassin to save the day and halt progress in its tracks.

“Who’s the target?”

You’re still keeping one eye on the rearview mirror as you adjust the volume of your speakers. It’s about to get louder.

“Are you driving?” Hisoka asks, finally having picked up on the ambient noise.

“Yes. Who’s the target?”

“That sounds very unsafe," his tone is half-teasing, half-bemused, "Should you really be taking this call?”

You grit your teeth. “The. Target.”

“Well," he finally says, letting the matter go, "It's actually two targets. Masamune Kogi and Fellow Radcliffe, both senators of the Federation of Ochima. Some bigwigs who are weak

individually but absolutely drenched in guards." You nod, knowing the type. Political assassinations are practically your bread and butter.

"Getting through security is one thing," Hisoka continues, "But real problem is that both targets need to be killed simultaneously. A two-pronged attack, if you will: one for you and one for me. And hey, I'll even let you choose which one you want to take! Special offer on the house."

You mull it over. It sounds convoluted: lots of moving parts, lots of ways to go wrong, a puzzle to solve. Exactly the kind of job you tend to enjoy coordinating-- but there's no way he could have known that. But something strikes you as off-- the whole thing felt rather out of character. You had pegged the magician as someone more interested in bloodsport than politics. What could motivate him to kill two random politicians with no innate combat prowess?

You don't voice these thoughts, of course. You're a professional: professionals don't question their client's motives.

You pivot to logistics instead.

"Why do they need to be killed simultaneously? And why in isolation? Just wait for them to be in the same room and take them out then."

"You hate fun, don't you?"

You tune out the magician's ensuing chuckle just as the glint of something behind the car catches your eye. Seconds later, a bullet whizzes by your driving arm and breaks the glass of the rearview mirror. You raise your hand to block the shards, a few lodging in your skin. One of the trucks has broken off and is creeping up your left side. The driver has one hand on the wheel and another on his pistol.

"Woah, nevermind! Was that a gunshot? Clearly you're having a *lot* of fun."

"Not really," you reply, shifting hands on the steering wheel while grabbing the needle tucked in your ponytail. You raise the arm with the glass shards still embedded in them and a large fragment manages to catch a glint of the sun. You turn your arm so that the glass shines a light onto the truck driver's eyes, hoping it'll buy you a few precious milliseconds while he's blinded. You hear another shot go off but it misses by a mile; you imbue the needle with *nen* and throw it at the driver's neck, hoping your aim is good enough from this distance to catch an artery.

It's a new trick you've been working on: **"Needle People"**. In the past, you've only been able to control corpses: they're less prone to fighting back. But you think you've found the trick to controlling the living as well- albeit to a lesser degree. You're still working on the complexity of your commands. Even so, this should still be enough to get the job done.

Your needle lands true. It takes effect almost immediately, the driver slowing as his eyes roll around in his head. Then, as per your commands, he shifts into reverse, turning the truck around and driving straight towards the other commandeered vehicle. Two birds, one stone.

The resulting explosion fills you with a deep satisfaction. You actually love car chases-- but your father doesn't like you driving.

Honestly, you crash a measly three Lamborghinis and one private jet and suddenly you're a "reckless driver."

You're saving up for a really, really expensive car. You can't wait to watch it explode.

"-umi? You alive over there? Still in one piece?" Your attention is brought back to the magician--your client.

"No," you clear your throat, "I've died, and will be haunting you through this phone for the rest of your days."

A genuine laugh rumbles through your speakers. "You're more fun than you look."

"Thank you," you try to make your reply as smooth as possible, threatening to fight a smile yourself. He's really caught you at a bad time-- you're not usually in this good of a mood. *Focus*. You tune out the feeling of everything but the wind on your neck. "You've failed to address my logistical concerns."

"Well, as I was trying to explain, the real target is Fellow Radcliffe. But all the Ochima senators-- all *fifty* of them-- have formed some kind of cabal with a *nen* contract to tie them together in pairs. Like a reverse voodoo-doll situation: as long as one lives, the other cannot die. Rather extreme as preventative measures go, but apparently there's been quite an uptick in assassinations since the new government was established..." He finishes slyly, as if you somehow have the monopoly on assassinations.

Now that you think about it, your father has been taking quite a few jobs in that region…

"What makes this senator so special? I didn't think you were one to go after a weak target."

"Ooh, jealous?"

"Are you going to be purposefully obtuse this entire phone call?"

"Answering a question with another question, my my…" Hisoka trails off, and you imagine him tapping his chin as he thinks of an answer. "I honestly have no desire to kill this particular specimen. I'm just playing another man's game-- for now."

This almost makes you hit the brakes. "You are bringing me in on an assassination *you're* already being paid for? I'll have you know I *don't* do third-party contracts-"

"Calm down, I'm not being paid. Not in money anyway."

Having extracted itself from the burning ruins of its vehicular compatriots, the police car is now gaining ground. You eye the upcoming intersection: should you head further up the mountain pass, or down into the tunnel?

You tune back into the phone call in time to hear, "It's favor I'm after."

“Favors?”

“No, doll; *favor* . I’m trying to win someone over.”

“What, like--" Your mouth twists in a grimace, “Courtship?”

He laughs at you again. “You speak like a prissy little royal sometimes. No, I’m not trying to win the hand of a fair maiden. There’s just... someone I’m interested in getting close to. Someone strong, whom I hope will one day put up a good fight. Call this an investment.”

For a minute, you entertain the ridiculous notion that this is somehow a ploy to get closer to *you.*

Which would make no sense at all. What interest could he have in a man he doesn't remember? And why would he go about it in such a roundabout way-- Hisoka's not exactly the type to beat around the bush.

You dismiss the thought as quickly as it came. It was a fanciful notion born from a wandering mind. You’re just not used to talking to people outside your family’s orbit; Hisoka has his own gravitational pull, and you’re barely in it. Which is how you like it, and how it shall remain.

Even so, your curiosity gets the better of you. “I don’t do jobs for third-parties.”

It’s not expressly true; your clients often have brokers and middle men they go through to remain anonymous. But to work for someone who- presumably- doesn’t even know they’ve hired you is unbefitting of an assassin of your caliber.

“Fair point. You ever heard of the Phantom Troupe?”

Ah.

The police car in the next lane is now closing in, trying to box you against the craggy mountainside. You won’t be so easily derailed; you shift gears and hit the brakes, skidding to a stop. The police car falls victim to its momentum, and without your vehicle there as a buffer, it crashes into the cliffside. You’re shifting gears again, reversing to avoid the wreckage.

There might still be more on your tail. You drive up the mountainside path, making sure to leave a few tire marks on the muddy road, before swerving around down the hill and back onto the road that leads to the tunnel. It wouldn’t hold up to close inspection, but your pursuers aren’t likely to be that discerning. It’s worth the few seconds you lose to cover your tracks.

“Hello? Still there? Did I scare you off?”

“Yes, the Phantom Troupe, I heard,” you say as you approach the tunnel. “My father had a run in with their leader a few years ago.”

“Oh, well, putting aside that very interesting tidbit of your life I’ll be sure to pry about later, their leader is actually the one I’m interested in. Perhaps we can exchange gossip over tea some time. If you’re willing to part with such precious trade secrets.”

“I don’t mind, but it will cost you. And no discount this time.”

“How very frugal.”

“Thank you.”

“It wasn’t a-- you know what, never mind. The job needs to be done within the next four days, so I need you to meet me at the Ochima airport as soon as possible.”

“I can be there by tomorrow afternoon.” If you manage to shake the horde of angry mafia heavy on your trail.

“Although," Hisoka continues, tone taking on that familiar teasing edge, "If we manage to get this job done before Friday, we’ll have the weekend to ourselves. I hear Ochima is known for its--”

“Sorry, I’m about to go into a tunnel. Bad signal. You’re breaking up. Psshhhst.”

“Wh-- are you seriously--”

“Can’t hear you. Bye,” you end the call over his half-spluttering, half-laughing protests. The tunnel’s gaping maw looms ahead of you. You drive into the belly of the beast.

You never do find out what Ochima is famous for.

Chapter End Notes

i am never writing a car chase scene again that was so hard.
but i will stand by the fact that illumi is a terrible driver and should not be trusted with any vehicle ever. did you see that man drift in his mercedez during the zodiac election? public safety risk no.1 who gave this man a license

(see you next week!)

Chapter 5: blackstone's card trick without cards

Chapter Summary

> ***"Blackstone's Card Trick Without Cards"*** *is a mathematical magic trick that, as the name implies, does not require a deck of cards.*

Chapter Notes

> not yet beta read, but i'll come back to her later and do some touch ups cause i'm sure i'll find mistakes later

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You meet Hisoka at the airport as promised. The first thing you notice is that he changed his hair.

You recall how the faded orange of your first encounter had deepened into auburn on your second sighting. On your third, it brightened to bubblegum pink. It is now an electric, garish blue, clashing with his green outfit and the little brown briefcase which already looked so out of place. You don't like it. You tell him as much, but he just laughs.

"We can't all stay the same forever," he says, "But I'll keep that in mind for next time."

Not wanting to dissect where these feelings were coming from, you let the topic of conversation drop.

The airship ride is in business class- he must have more money these days if he's able to afford such amenities- and you find yourself lulled into a comfortable silence for the bulk of the flight. Hisoka taps away on his phone, long nails clinking against the glass screen before tossing it to the side and focusing all his attention on stacking a house of cards. You were worried there'd be pressure to converse, and you'd have to engage in stilted small talk with the first non-family member you've spoken to in-- well, in a while. Hisoka seems content in his own little world, so you turn your gaze to the window and allow yourself to sink into a state of hibernation.

You're interrupted once or twice by flight attendants asking if they can take your order; you decline, of course–- being immune to most poisons doesn't mean you go around tempting fate. Assassins, as a rule, shouldn't accept food if they don't know where it's been prepared.

Hisoka has no such reservations, ordering a cocktail and a fruity dessert-thing. For some inexplicable reason, you expected the magician would offer you a bite. It would be the polite thing to do, even if you would inevitably decline. But he does no such thing. The plate is cleaned even of crumbs, and the cocktail down to the dregs.

You conclude that his reluctance to share must be another lesson on his character: the magician is *greedy*.

“Did you grow up poor?” You ask, already knowing the answer.

Hisoka actually looks affronted. “Wow… and here I thought you rich kids were brought up with manners. That’s not a very polite question to ask someone, you know.”

“Is it not?” You tilt your head to the side, considering this. It’s a straightforward question, you think. And it wasn’t as if you were mocking him.

“Ever heard the expression ‘Never ask a woman her age, or a man his salary?’ Some things just aren’t to be said out loud.”

He seemed to have gotten over the offense, and his tone is back to teasing. Patronizing. “Speaking of… how old are you, Illumi?”

“I’m not a woman,” is the first thing that comes out of your mouth, “And that’s none of your business." Surprised by the bite of your own tone, you tilt your head consideringly. “Ah. I think I see what you mean.”

“Very good!” Hisoka clapped his hands, “You’ve learned some basic social etiquette.”

He’s making fun of you. Oddly enough, you don’t find yourself too bothered. Teasing is worth enduring if you learn something new from this conversation.

“But to answer your question,” Hisoka continues, “Yes, my upbringing likely pales in comparison to a Zoldyck billionaire’s childhood. I suspect, however, that this is an affliction shared by most of the world's population.”

“I’m not a billionaire,” You frown. Not individually, anyway. Just about all the money you earn from jobs goes to the family, for your parents and grandfather to handle. “The Zoldyck *family* is worth billions, but that doesn’t mean we all have access to it.”

“Aw, how tragic,” Hisoka pouts mockingly. “Do you at least get an allowance from Daddy?”

You do, in fact, get an allowance.

“I see your point,” you say, after a pause. “This line of conversation has indeed become uncomfortable.”

“Oh, I’m so terribly sorry– hey!” Hisoka jumps up as you run your hand through his stacked cards and topple them to the ground. You stare unerringly at him until he sits back down.

“That took me a while to finish, you know,” he says, tone petulant. You had noticed earlier that he was attaching *nen* to each card- perhaps to make them stick together? A transmuter, then.

“How would you feel if I tore apart your knitting?”

“I don’t knit,” the assumption is perplexing. “Why would I knit?”

“Oh come on, we all have hobbies.” He waves his hand at the pins tucked into your jacket. “I assume those must be good for something other than stabbing. Embroidery, perhaps?”

You consider this. “I had not thought to use them like that before.”

“You don’t have a lot of hobbies, do you?”

“I have no need to waste my time with trivialities.”

“How sad,” he says, and it seems almost genuine. “Time is there to be wasted.”

“Agree to disagree,” you intone. This conversation has become tiresome, and you would like to go back to not-quite-sleeping again.

Hisoka has finished gathering the cards together and lays them out on the table. “I used to be able to read tarot. Some old lady taught me– Madame Yaba, or something. Old hag. Terrible attitude.” He says all this absentmindedly as if he’d forgotten you were there. You’re taken aback– judging by the sore spot you hit earlier, Hisoka doesn’t seem like the type to want to talk about his past.

“I was pretty good at it,” he continues, “But better with card tricks. Pick a card.”

You point to one at random.

“No, no, don’t tell me. I’m going to try and guess. In fact,” He says, and with a sweep of his hand gathers the cards back into a deck and stows them away, “We don’t even need any cards.”

“What’s the point of a card trick without cards?”

“All card tricks,” he says flippantly, “Are mind tricks. This one is proof of that. Now think of a card in your mind. Hold it there. Visualize it. We’re going to assign each card a value between 1 and 13- starting with ace and ending with king. Now, picture your card and its number.”

“What about the joker,” you interrupt.

He smiles toothily. “The Joker’s been taken out of the running for now.”

You have no idea why you’re playing along with this, but there are three hours left on this flight and you don’t think Hisoka will let you sleep until he’s been sufficiently entertained.

“Ok,” you say slowly, “I have a card.”

“Alright, so picture that card, and take its number and double it. Now take that new value, add three, and then multiply it by five. Are you following me?

Follow me, your traitorous brain echoes, *follow me, follow me, follow the lady.*

“If your card is a spade, subtract one. If your card is a heart, subtract two. If your card is a club, subtract three. If your card is a diamond, subtract four. Take a second. Hold that final number in your head. Visualize it. I’m going to reach into your mind and guess the card.”

“Charlatan.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Good, now keep holding that card in your mind. I’m reaching out, rummaging through your thoughts, looking for your card. I think I see it, it’s getting clearer and clearer… is your card… the Ace of Spades?”

You find yourself disappointed, and then disappointed for being disappointed. You should really know better by now.

“No.”

“No?”

“No. I thought you were supposed to be good at this.”

“Well,” he sighs, “I suppose today my luck is waning.” He leans in suddenly, eyeing you eagerly. “Is there anything *you’re* good at?”

“Besides killing people?”

“Besides killing people.”

“I’m very good…” you pause, “I’m very good at sleeping with my eyes open.”

Hisoka barks out a laugh, looking surprised himself. “Is that so?”

“Yes. I’ve been told I make a very convincing conscious person.”

“Illumi, is it possible…” Hisoka says with a barely restrained grin, “That you do have a sense of humor after all?”

“Surely not.” You say, pleased with yourself. “I am very serious. I can sleep with my eyes open, and train my body to act on autopilot so that I appear awake. In fact, I could be sleeping right now.”

Hisoka laughs even louder; it's the kind of laugh he doesn't often share: not a menacing chuckle or a teasing giggle, this is a real, throaty laugh. Your chest feels oddly warm, the gratification of the moment not escaping your notice. You have broken through one of his

masks, learned something new, and gained leverage in the process. The scales have tipped to your side once more. It's relief that spreads through your body; you are back in control.

The job continues its smooth course, against all odds. You take out a dozen bodyguards and then the senator with a pin between the eyes, just as the clock strikes midnight. Your timing is perfect, and Hisoka's seemingly was as well– considering both your targets remain dead. You find Hisoka in the agreed-upon meeting spot, back on his phone tapping away on his screen. Perhaps he is letting his new toy know about their job well done. You asked Hisoka not to mention your involvement and hope he keeps his word. Your father had warned you to stay away from the Troupe, and while you've technically had no contact with them, you don't want to push that boundary any further.

He looks up at you with a nod and excuses himself to go shower. His small, carry-on briefcase sits unopened beneath his bed. You hadn't planned on snooping, but after the conversation on the airship, you find yourself insatiably curious. It feels juvenile; you resolve to just take a peek.

You slide the briefcase out from underneath the bed, careful not to disturb anything. Knowing Hisoka, anything could be in there. It's a relatively simple briefcase, brown leather with a silver latch. It's not even locked.

You open it just a crack, in case there's some kind of trap mechanism, but you find none. Struck with the feeling of being a misbehaving child, you decide then that you're above such things. Just as you're about to close it again, you see a flash of the interior. It's empty.

No, you realize in growing horror, *not empty* . There is one, single card embedded in the black leather lining the bottom. You catch only a flash of it, but you're sure– it's the Queen of Hearts.

Your card.

All card tricks are mind tricks , he had said. Somehow he knew. You thought he was letting his guard down, but it was the other way around. You had fallen for a trap so simple a child should've been able to see through it.

Follow the lady follow the lady follow–

He doesn't remember. You're positive. He can't remember.

It might not even be the Queen of Hearts, you try to assure yourself. It could be confirmation bias. Perhaps if you opened the briefcase again and got a better look–

No. *Fool me once.*

You close the trap and shove it back under the bed. You were going to wait for Hisoka to get out of the shower– you'd desperately like a bath– but you suddenly could not stand to be in this room for one moment longer. You gather your things and exit the room without a word. You call a car, and then, after a moment of consideration, open your direct messages.

You send him the bill and nothing else. He should be smart enough to get the message: your debts are now settled.

Weeks later, you receive an embroidery kit in the mail.

Chapter End Notes

you know that tweet that's like "hisoillu fics always make illumi annoyed at hisoka 90% of the time when it really should be the other way around" and honestly theyre right. i think they bothe annoy each other but looking specifically at canon most times they clash its hisoka getting exasperated at illumi's lack of self-awareness/ general bastardry. you know that scene in the election arc. you know the one.
like, don't get me wrong, i think hisoka enjoys baiting illumi a lot more than the other way around. but illumi's bimbo behaviors tend to piss everyone around him off without even trying, so it evens out yk

on the other hand, when you look at canon, it actually seems like 90% of the time they're pretty chill with each other? like enjoying each other's company and all that? you see especially in the hunter exam arc how they just seem to be having a good time as the two most overqualified people in the exam room. i admit being guilty of adding lots of tension and frustration between the two in past fics because its fun, but i wanted to explore the other side of that as well- i think they genuinely like spending time together. which is such a novel concept considering... everything about their personalities. so yeah. they get annoyed and antsy but indulge each other now and then because who else is going to.

(oh, and i gave them hobbies. we know hisoka stacks cards, its not a reach to assume he does more. and i've always hc'd that illumi knits or embroiders considering that nen tends to manifest around things you've taken interest in. perhaps kikyo used to embroider- she seems like the type- and illumi got fixated on that. also, the visual of this man just like sitting in a park knitting is too fucking funny to ignore)

see you next week!

Chapter 6: legerdemain

Chapter Summary

> ***"Legerdemain:"*** *showing the requisite dexterity needed for slight-of-hand tricks / Acting in trickery or deceit.*

Chapter Notes

> haha two days late, what? it's sunday somewhere...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You are pinning a man to the floor with one foot, slowly crushing his sternum, when you get a call from your near-hysterical mother. She's wailing, inconsolable. The prodigal son has abandoned the estate.

“Killua went rogue!” she cries, “But your father has decided that we must let him go without pursuit. Imagine! My little boy, out there, alone, exposed to the world and all its wickedness. Well, I *won’t* be having it! Disgusting, shameful, shameful, *shameful*...”

She continues sobbing wretchedly and you find that you don’t know what to say. The man below you gurgles pathetically.

“What will you do?” You finally ask.

“Do? *Do!?”* Your mother exclaims, “There is nothing *to* do! Nothing at all! Not from here, with your father and grandfather so stubborn in their ways. Wretches, the lot of them! Blinded by naiveté. They are convinced he will return of his own accord, that this ‘little rebellion’ is good for him.”

She pauses to blow her nose. You shift your foot against the man’s sternum for better purchase. You're not exactly sure why you're drawing this kill out.

“Make no mistake, he will come back to us eventually.” Your mother's voice sharpens, each word laced in arsenic. “But, *oh*, in what *shape!* In what *form!* Who knows how he will be poisoned against us by the scum out there. I *shudder* to think of the time we'll lose molding him back into perfection."

You hear her unspoken request. She is asking you to watch over him, to keep an eye on him until he comes to his senses. While you personally agree with her judgement, you're wary of

defying your father’s direct orders.

“I will talk to Father.” You promise. That is the least you can do.

“Oh, thank you Illumi,” her voice has stopped wavering and is now sickly sweet. “You’re such a good boy to your mother.”

You don’t know what to say to that either, so you flip your phone closed. Below you, a final crack of bone. Then, blessed silence.

Your father approves your crusade with a dismissive wave.

"You are your mother's son," he says, and it doesn't sound complimentary. "Do as you wish. I have my own resources."

You nod, then stride briskly out of the room while Miké's brothers' nip at your heels. You wonder, not for the first time, about your parents' marriage. You can't remember the last time you saw them in the same room together.

Is this what marriage is? Two people connected by children and spite?

The only time you've ever been called 'Your father's son,' was during one of your mother's episodes. She clawed at your face and then her own when you tried to pry her hands away.

"You're just like him!" She had cried as you tried to calm her down, "Trying to keep me quiet. You *are* your father's son, after all!"

You don't think that was a compliment either.

You run into Hisoka at Heaven's Arena. It is the first place you think to look for Killua, and in the end there's no denying it: you *are* your mother’s son. You won’t let him go so easily.

Several years ago you came here to scout out the place and ensure it was a good environment for your little brother’s training. Your father insisted that the fighters be strong and your mother hoped they’d be pathetic. Hisoka might just make the cut. He seems right at home in the halls of Heaven's arena, wearing a colorful little outfit that clashes with... well, everything. All the opponents here are characters in their own right, images tailored to stand out amongst the crowd. You perused through a few matches on your flight over here, but don't recognize anyone here. Perhaps all the bigshots are tucked away on the 200th floor.

For once, he notices you before you notice him. You had expected he might be here, but not mingling on the lower floors with the unfettered trash. Hisoka's hand grazes your arm, and it's only years of training your reflexes that prevent you from physically startling. You hadn't sensed him coming at all. You had let your guard down. He gives you a smile that says he knows how much his stunt bothered you, but doesn't take a step back to alleviate some of that tension.

"Hello, Illumi."

You take in his appearance. His nails are painted pale pink, and they dig into your arm and refuse to let go. His bare midriff glitters with some kind of piercing. He’s changed his hair again: mint green. You don’t like it.

"What are you doing here?" You hate the earnest little thing that slips into your voice. He has done nothing to earn it.

"I'm here to fight, of course; the luxuries of the tower are just to *die* for. I hear the abilities of the Floormasters are really something to behold."

That much you had already gathered. "I meant, what are you doing the 50th floor? I should think you'd be more interested in high-tier opponents."

He hums at your question, tapping his nails against your forearm in a light staccato rhythm. "But that's exactly it- I'm on the hunt for my next diamond to polish. Down here, where people let their guard down, those uncut gems shine even brighter. I'm just getting ahead of the curve."

You curl your lip, unable to hold back your disgust. As an assassin, you take pride in your work- but at the end of the day, it's still work. One isn't supposed to enjoy themselves, fighting just for the sake of fighting, exposing oneself to vulnerability just for the thrill of it. Fighting rings are unprofessional, amateurish, and an insult to your profession.

"I suppose the barbarities of this place suit men of your... lifestyle," You can't help but dig, leaning in closer.

"You flatter me." Hisoka's tone is kept airy while he looms even closer. You're both standing in the middle of this wide hallway on the 50th floor of Heaven's Arena, with God only knows how many people milling about, drawing closer and closer to each other in a way that's bound to be misunderstood. You step forward anyway. From here you can count the moles and freckles and blemishes he's buried under layers of foundation, and you can smell his saccharine perfume. Maybe that's what has gotten into your head-- some kind of olfactory toxin.

But you've built up an immunity to every major poison in the trade, so that really shouldn't matter.

Hisoka threads a coin through his fingers. "What is an assassin of your caliber doing in a place like this then, with all its *barbarities*?” Hisoka looks him up and down, something pulling at his lip. Almost to himself, he mutters, “Fitting in like an eel in a fish tank.” His

tone is no less disparaging than before, but you fight to not take that as a compliment. You like eels.

"I am only fulfilling my brotherly duties."

You realize an instant too late that you've revealed *far* too much.

"Oh, there's more of you? Little assassins running around, playing murder?"

Godammit. You try to cover your blunder by changing the subject. "As I hear it, Heavens Arena does not condone killing in matches below the 200th floor. Diamonds-in-the-rough or not, I didn't think this place would appeal to someone like you."

"Yes, you've made your confusion on the matter quite clear," Hisoka arranges his face into an exaggerated pout. "Now tell me, to which of my many outstanding qualities are you referring to when you insinuate such unkind things?"

You don't need to think about the answer.

"Bloodlust. Thrillseeking. The ever-present hunger for a fight."

Hisoka quirks his mouth and you wish you were better at reading his smiles.

"Are you offering?" He makes the prospect sound unreasonably salacious.

You don't have a good answer for him: a 'yes' would egg him on, while a 'no' would make you sound afraid. Normally, your default strategy when backed into a corner during a verbal spar is to disengage-- and by that you mean stare blankly at your opponent until they get unnerved enough to back off. Unfortunately Hisoka doesn't seem particularly unnerved by your blank stare; but he's also not one to let silence drag.

"No killing, yes," Hisoka concedes, allowing his proposition to slip away quietly in an uncustomary gesture of mercy, "But arenas of this size are the perfect place to cultivate talent. Why, just last week I found myself somewhat challenged by an opponent even younger than you. I can't wait to see what becomes of him in a few years..."

Later, you would find yourself online, hunting for a recording of the match. You'll tell yourself it was worth it to observe Hisoka's fighting abilities, should he ever become too dangerous to be left alive. And you had to admit: on that stage, the magician was truly in his element. His opponent that day, a man named Kastro, was an enhancer of decent potential. You'll tamp down the urge to correct Hisoka when you find out that, at twenty-three, Kastro is actually *older* than you by about a year. No good can come of giving the magician more personal information than necessary. It was bad enough that you had been unable to tear your eyes from the screen as Hisoka sauntered off the ring, three hits down, eyes glinting with that all-too-familiar hunger. The only time you've ever seen Hisoka exercise patience is in baiting his prey.

The enhancer may have potential, but you are under no misconceptions as to how their next fight will go. To Hisoka, people like Kastro are nothing more than the curtain a cat uses to

sharpen its claws.

In the present, you nod stiffly and disentangle yourself from his grip.

"May the best man win."

Hisoka is staring at you with bemusement like you've just presented him with a strange gift or unsolvable puzzle.

"Say, why don't you enter in a match? Test your skills against the best this corner of the world has to offer."

"You and I both know that isn't very much."

"Touché," he sighs, "But a shame. I would *so* enjoy watching you work again."

"I'm on business," you say dismissively, already turning around to walk away, "Even if I wanted to, I don't have time to indulge any frivolities."

"Brother business?" He shoots back with a toothy grin.

"*Goodbye*, Hisoka." you say firmly.

"Good luck!" He calls back.

Good riddance goes unsaid.

Chapter End Notes

if there are inconsistencies in the timeline no there aren't <3

Chapter 7: equivoque

Chapter Summary

"Equivocation:" *a technique by which a magician appears to have intended a particular outcome, when in actuality the outcome is one of several alternatives; also known as a Magician's Choice.*

"Equivoque:" *an expression capable of having more than one meaning. ;)*

Chapter Notes

part 1 of the hunter exam

CW for this chapter: mildly explicit (albeit awkward) sex between two consenting adults, AND allusions to coercive underage sex (not hisoillu) + grooming/ child abuse typical of a Zoldyck upbringing.
if you would like to skip this go from the line "You open your mouth to tell the truth-" to "In hindsight, you're struck by how easy it all was," a few paragraphs down. see end notes for a recap.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is the first time you've organized something together since your initial deal- the moments you've seen each other since have been mostly accidental or in passing. What could have been a nice milestone for the two of you is ruined when Hisoka brings roses.

Tied around the flower's stems was a card depicting a bride and groom, contorting their limbs through each other in a macabre game of twister. It bore the label "*Congratulations on Tying the Knot!"*

When interrogated, Hisoka feigned innocence (poorly), and said he just couldn't find any cards celebrating the "start of a beautiful business association."

The roses make good kindling.

Outside of his usual antics, Hisoka proves to be a surprisingly adequate partner. He's attuned to your movements without being clingy, helpful without being meddlesome, and his general aura of menace draws attention away from the mildly unsettling visage of Gittarackur.

You'd both agreed to not make contact during the first phase– more unwanted attention. But when you exit the forest with minutes to spare and see no sign of Hisoka amongst the examinees, you flip open the burner phone you'd purchased specifically for this purpose.

"Hisoka. Get a move on– the second phase is about to start."

Hisoka's voice finally cuts through the muffled static of your phone: "Roger, be right there."

You think you can hear some sounds of struggle on the other end of the phone, but it's none of your business how Hisoka gets his thrills– as long as he finishes in time for the next test. You're about to hang up when you hear him talking to someone, voice farther away as if he'd let the phone drop away from his ear.

"Friendship sure is a fine thing."

You hang up.

You can feel an aura of concentrated malice spilling from Hisoka like an ocean current. Well, you and *everyone else* in a two mile radius who has any nen sensitivity whatsoever. You're too far away to make eye contact, so you punch a quick text into your phone and hope his isn't silent.

Hisoka. <<
You're Leaking. <<

Through the corner of your vision you see him pull out his phone, and the furrowed brow he'd been sporting lifts to accommodate his wide, lecherous grin. In a moment, he'll probably try to find your eyes in the crowd. You keep your gaze firmly on the faces of the examiners.

Not even three seconds go by before you receive a returning buzz. You flip open your phone as discreetly as possibly and are met with the exact sort of message you'd predicted.

> only for you, darling ♡

Control yourself. <<

> around you?
> never ♤

You close your phone and bite back a sigh. You're not so naive that you don't know what he wants from you. Later tonight you'll likely be receiving on the receiving end of a lascivious photo attachment. And no doubt the magician will be having a long laugh at your expense.

You feel vindicated when the weight of his ren lifts. It may have been a cheap shot to grab his attention, but at least you know it worked. And he wasn't the only one who needed the edge taken off; the gourmet hunters– the ones *acting as your exam proctors* that Hisoka seems determined to piss off *anyway*– visibly relax as his bloodthirst retreats.

The woman with the giant cleavers goes on to explain the task, much to the chagrin of your fellow examiners. You honestly don't share their distaste (pun unintended); as far as you're concerned, *every* phase of the exam is going to be inane and tedious- hardly likely to pose any challenge. One might as well break up the monotony of fighting weakling after weakling with a cook-off.

The examiners are thrown for a loop when the huntress mentions sushi. You're not surprised that someone like Hisoka has never heard of the dish before, but you *are* disappointed to see no recognition on your brother's face. After all, your mother used to have both sushi and sashimi prepared regularly by the kitchen staff. You'd never seen her do it herself- much less been taught personally- but at least you know the principle. It's a shame Killua doesn't remember. You think back to the last time you had a family dinner with all members present…

Ah. It was probably before Killua had started eating solids. You can excuse his forgetfulness once he returns home, as long as he commits to joining the family for dinner at least once a month.

As it were, the second phase wound up getting derailed before swerving sharply back on track– courtesy of the Chairman himself. You swallow your disappointment. You didn't get to eat a single piece of proper sushi.

Perhaps when you return to the manor with Killua, your mother will be well enough to have some prepared.

Part of you envies the poor souls who lack the skills to complete Trick Tower in a timely manner. There is absolutely nothing to do but wait in this wide, sparse room that affords you neither privacy nor furnishings. The pins start to itch beneath your skin; they weren't meant to be held in for days at a time, and there's nothing you can do to distract yourself from the discomfort.

Hisoka is stacking cards in the corner. You don't know how such a task manages to hold his attention for hours at a time, but you're grateful for the lack of chatter. In this form, your voice box deteriorates the more you use it. Not that you'd be up for conversation with him either way.

Certainly not.

With ten hours to spare, you note that Killua hasn't made it yet. You would have placed your bets on him being faster– but you must remind yourself that this isn't cause for disappointment. Likely his teammates are the ones slowing him down. This will be a learning experience, you think. Rely on no one else, or see yourself fall behind. The sooner Killua learns that, the sooner he can come home.

Some miniscule, traitorous part of your psyche wonders how fast you could have made it to the bottom with Hisoka at your side. He looks up just as your eyes glance away, the smirk that decorates his face all but spelling out *I caught you thinking about me*. Sometimes it really *does* feel like he can read your mind.

Thankfully, you know better. The way he looks at you as if he knows you, the not-so-fleeting touches, the breaching of boundaries, the small intimacies you two have cultivated throughout the years… you know it's just another one of the magician's tricks.

Hisoka curls a finger towards you: a silent invitation. You know better than to accept. But you have nearly half a day left and nothing else to do, and really there's no harm in indulging him for just one game, is there?

Certainly not, says the voice that's starting to sound less and less like Reason.

You two play in complete silence for several hours. It's a surprisingly pleasant way to pass the time. Occasionally a participant will wander in, and Hisoka will catch your eye again to gauge your reaction, both of you passing silent judgment on the other test takers. *Seventy,* he mouths, pointing at the bald ninja. You tilt your head quizzically. *Out of what?* He just rolls his eyes at you with a look that seems both endeared and frustrated. He points up; formed by nen just above his fingernail is the number *100.* You think on it for a moment before shaping your own nen to look like the number *48* . This is enough to get Hisoka to laugh out loud– much to the terror of the other examinees.

Before you know it, the timer is counting down from its last minute.

Killua makes it with seconds to spare.

You can't banish the sight of him smiling wider than you've ever seen him, arm around another boy's shoulder (you'll have to learn that one's name). Your baby brother's face is all scuffed up, there is dirt crowded beneath his nails, and there's a layer of dust that's settled over his clothes.

He looks happy.

Somehow, you end up bunking with Hisoka.

This was not planned– in fact, it was only through a series of contrived switches that you ended up here. Your original roommate– a stout, older man that had apparently failed the exam 35 times– made a big fuss about changing rooms when he laid eyes upon you. It's almost flattering.

He apparently switched with the man who brought a pet monkey, and *that* man switched with the fussy beekeeper, who then switched with the snake-charmer. Eventually, the so-called "Rookie-Crusher" landed in Hisoka's room, and begged him (on his knees, no less), to move to your room. He cited his desire to bunk with the monkey-man (a motive so clearly fabricated it was almost insulting), and embellished a few details about *your* own cabin to paint it as the more luxurious option. You suspect Hisoka agreed mostly to watch him squirm in nervous gratitude, wondering when the other shoe was going to drop. He left a stacked house of cards behind, "as a present." You doubt that the Rookie-Crusher will be getting any sleep.

As it turns out, neither do you.

It's the first time you two have sex. It involved surprisingly little talking– both before and during the act– which you choose to interpret as a courtesy. He also telegraphed his advances from a mile away. You could have easily avoided this, you could have made him back off. But you *don't*.

And perhaps that was his intention all along: to make you have a hand in your own downfall, to not be able to deny that this was something you wanted enough to pursue. You convince yourself that, by not wallowing in the shame he's so good at inducing, you are effectively claiming victory over him in this game.

It certainly feels like victory.

The whole affair started with him asking to see your transformation. You'd rather sleep without the pins anyway, so it's easy to indulge him. Then he wanted to see the perforations in your skin, and to know if the pins left any scarring behind. You show him how you insert them with enough precision to keep the epidermis intact. His fingers are on your face, and you feel the long nails of his thumbs tilting up your chin to look you in the eye.

"You want this," he challenges you, speaking the unspoken out loud. You don't see any point in denying it.

"No more than you."

He gives you another one of his throaty chuckles and presses his thumb into your windpipe– not so hard it cuts off your air, but just enough to feel the pulse of blood rushing through your veins and the swallow that travels down your throat.

"Ask for it."

You open your mouth to tell the truth, not a coherent thought in your mind. The rational part of your brain fights back and stops the words from spilling out just in time. Instead, you bring

your face level with his pointer finger and take it into your mouth. Hisoka's nail curls a bit, scraping your tongue and the inside of your cheek. You taste a hint of blood.

Hisoka now half-stands, half-leans over you, looming dangerously close until his figure is all you can see. The sun is setting behind him and half the room has been cast into shadow. His face is too shrouded in darkness for you to clearly make out his expression, but you think he's grinning.

He feeds another finger into your mouth before forcing both digits deeper down your throat. You suspect his intention is to make you choke, which is ridiculous– you've long since mastered your gag reflex. But no amount of training can stop the saliva from spilling out of your mouth as your tongue struggles to accommodate him. Your eyes are fixated on Hisoka's face, which you still cannot see. Your hands, meanwhile, have found their way to his sides- you grip the fabric of his pants roughly enough to tear. You smell his perfume and hear the obscene sounds your mouth is making around him when he adds a third finger.

Hisoka is imposing himself on each and every single one of your senses. It's somehow not enough.

Your hands on his pants tighten further; he obliges your unspoken demand by helping you push them down. The fingers in your mouth are hastily replaced. It's more of a struggle not to choke this time.

It's not really a conscious decision to spread your legs- so that he can perfectly fit his knee in between them- just as it wasn't a conscious decision to rut against him. Those choices were made through pure instinct.

Instinct- like remembering to guard your flank, or take your shoes off when you step indoors, or how to lop off a man's head: all things so natural they need not be considered. That's how easy these motions come to you.

When he's finished with your mouth he pushes you back onto the bed and returns the favor. You don't even have the presence of mind to be embarrassed by how quickly you're brought over the edge.

It doesn't take much convincing to let him fuck you. You already know how his fingers feel inside your mouth; you're positive you can manage them in this new orifice too. Next time you do this, you'll insist upon Hisoka clipping his nails ('next time' being an assumption you dare not question) as it's quite inefficient to have nails scraping around inside you instead of the deliberate pressure of a finger.

Compelled by an uncharacteristic impatience, you shove Hisoka off after two fingers and inform him (in as even a tone as you can manage) that he'll *just have to make it work*. He grins, and when he grabs your hips and maneuvers you into place he seems giddy, almost boyish. Excited in a way that a child might be while unwrapping a present, rather than a philanderer making a conquest.

At first, it feels neither pleasurable nor painful. Just an awkward sensation, somewhat like a particularly uncomfortable cramp. Then, the angle changes, and– Oh. *Oh.*

Ohhh–

"*Fuck* you're tight. Been saving yourself, Illumi?"

"No–" you say, but it comes out like a gasp.

While you're far from being a virgin, anal sex was never a topic of particular interest. You tried it once, but never got past that initial feeling of discomfort. It was easier at that point to just lie back and let your client have his fun.

That particular client was old money, and thus quite familiar with your family's business. He'd hired you for your skills as an assassin, and kept you around for your *other* qualities. There came a point when he made it clear that a business relationship was not enough. He offered… you don't remember how many million jenny, but enough to raise a few eyebrows.

Now, in the past you would sleep with clients here and there, but never for money– secrets and favors were far more valuable as currency. In the words of your mother: *"Leverage is a jewel more priceless than gold."*

It's to your responsibility, Illu, she said, words dripping with motherly affection, *To use any gifts you have to their best advantage.*

So when your client made you that inevitable offer, you accepted. It took no time at all for him to unleash the full force of his *affection;* whether it was trying to track you down in the middle of a job, showing up unannounced, sending gifts to your layover apartment in Yorknew, adorning you in expensive, heavy jewelry.

It's funny how quickly a man that fucks you starts to think he owns you.

Taking his money and his cock was a business transaction bookended by a favor– nothing more. Having sex was an opportunity to leave your head and lodge yourself firmly in your body. But this man who was nearly twice your age and considerably experienced could not even grant you *that* .

Coincidentally, half a year later he ended up with a target on his back. As soon as you caught wind of the job, you asked your father for the assignment. You don't usually choose your jobs– it is the duty of a son to unquestioningly carry out the orders of the patriarch– but your father made an exception as a gift for your eighteenth birthday. You savored every moment of his death, lodged firmly in your body.

You're ripped back into the present when Hisoka rakes a hand through your hair. He will not let you disengage.

"Don't tell me you were waiting until marriage." He mockingly entwines his fingers with yours, a gesture that might have been romantic if it'd been between literally anyone else. You blink and try to remember what you two had been talking about.

Oh yes. Virginity.

"If that was the case, I'd be divorced several times over."

“Hah!” Hisoka lets loose a sound that’s part-laugh, part-groan. “A real heartbreaker,” He keeps his tone light even as his hand finds its way back to your hair, yanking it back to expose your throat. Hisoka drags those obscenely long nails down the hollow of your neck.

“What do you say, doll,” he claws into your flesh, “Wanna be my bride?”

“Over–” you’re cut off when his knuckles finally press hard enough to constrict your airflow. You struggle for breath. “Over my dead body.”

And you mean that. There is no world in which Illumi Zoldyck ties himself to a man like Hisoka.

“That can be arranged,” is his oh-so-predictable response.

You don’t dignify that with an answer, and the rest of your evening follows in a similar fashion: push and pull, give and take, receive and reciprocate.

In hindsight, you’re struck by how easy it all was. Whenever you had imagined the tension boiling over between you two– which you’ll freely admit, you *had* imagined – you always thought it would happen in some kind of battle while tensions were running high. Later, you might have been able to chalk it up as an adrenaline rush and nothing more. This, right now, is not a release of tension. It’s far from gentle– you don’t think either of you know how to *do* gentle– but it was… relaxed. Natural. Like a slow unwinding rather than a grand explosion.

This odd contentment of yours lingers through the night and into the early morning. You watch from the mast as your airship flies away, leaving your fellow examinees stranded on this remote island. It was hardly a situation that you would normally feel *stress* over– frustration, perhaps, maybe boredom– but you find yourself completely unbothered by this development. When Hisoka tells you to trust the others, that they *will* find a way to Zevil Island without either of you needing to interfere, you don’t push back. You find yourself a cozy spot inside one of the warship’s propellers and take a long nap.

Hisoka ended up being– mostly– right. The crew was able to find a way to plot their course to the next testing ground, and even get the warship up and running again by blasting half the cliff face off. They avoid the worst of the whirlpool. You and Hisoka only need to step in at the very end; Hisoka pulls Gon Freecss (the boy your brother has been getting worryingly close to) out of the water, and you take over steering the ship when the Kurta boy gets knocked unconscious.

It’s quite a successful mission, all things considered. You even find yourself in a generous enough mood to patch up the Kurta while he’s still knocked out. Head wounds almost always look worse than they are– what with the disproportionate amount of bleeding–- but you figure there’s no need to add blood loss to the de facto vice-captain’s woes. You owe him a bit for making these last couple of days so peaceful.

It is with that act of altruism that you bid farewell to the Third Phase and let your eyes drift lazily back towards the approaching horizon.

Chapter End Notes

> RECAP IF YOU SKIPPED: hisoka and illumi have sex, and illumi recalls the time he had an adult client proposition him at the age of 17. he was encouraged by the family- and his mother specifically- to take up his offer and use it as leverage. illumi agrees and proceeds to disassociate through most of it. later he gets hired to kill that very same guy, and finds that he really preferred the murdering part! normal stuff yk. he comes back to himself after that, and hisoka somehow keeps him grounded for the rest of the experience (whether intentionally or not). illumi finds himself in a good mood the next day.

hoooooo boy we're starting to get on the canon timeline, which is both exciting and daunting. speaking of canon: i'm pulling a lot of stuff in this chapter from the 1999 anime (specifically, a large part of the treasure-hunting arc that is exclusive to that series) with bits and pieces of the manga and 2011 added in wherever i can find space for it. HxH 1999 has been posted in it's entirety on youtube , and i cannot recommend it enough if you're as starved for content in the year of our lord 2024 as me.

but babe wake up because hxh is coming back!!!! cannot wait for the succession war i am giggling and kicking my feet and twirling my hair at the prospect of getting to see the boat girlies again. i also might have a fic or two in the works.... shhh...

also disclaimer this is the closest i have ever gotten to writing smut and it's especially strange in second person. i wanted the language to feel a bit clinical and awkward as per my usual reading of illumi, but that doesn't make for very titillating content so you'll have to excuse me. also undecided if i wanna bump up the rating or not. what even separates M from E anyway? ratio of porn to plot? anyway would so love and appreciate any feedback you have for me and i look forward to seeing you next sunday (dislcaimer: probably)

Chapter 8: misdirection

Chapter Summary

> ***"Misdirection"*** *is a form of deception in which the performer draws an audience's attention to one artifice, thus distracting from another.*

Chapter Notes

> it has taken everything i have to ignore the twitter leaks..... togashi deliver me from this pain... just one more day....
>
> in the meantime, here's this thing no one is asking for or wants. (i'm a pioneer)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zevil Island is the most boring phase of the hunter exam yet.

You try to drag out the fight with your target– Number 371– but you fear you simply don't have the same taste for playing with your food that Hisoka does. (You can faintly recall Kalluto developing a similar habit. It's something you should talk to your mother about once the family is reunited.)

Your target's injury is fatal, and he's too weak to stay on his feet for long.

How disappointing,

You find yourself bored enough to call Hisoka. You consider warning him of an approaching victim, but figure he'll enjoy it more as a surprise.

"Hisoka. Found your target yet?"

"Nope." His voice is a bit fuzzy through the receiver, but think you detect boredom in his tone as well.

"You have no idea who your target is, do you." You don't bother posing it as a question.

"Not a clue."

"Want a hint?" You're pretty confident that you've memorized the full roster.

"Nah… more fun this way."

Sensing he's not in a chatty mood, you hang up and deal with the sniper in the shadows.

You make her death fast. To be honest, she was pissing you off– crouching in the shrubbery as if it could effectively hide her presence. You're almost insulted. You've now tolerated two days of her amateur stalking, waiting for her to at least make a move, and you've grown impatient. You're well-versed in stakeouts like this and the boredom they bring, but it seems Hisoka is rubbing off on you– in all the worst ways.

Speak of the devil-- you locate the small clearing he's been wasting time in, and watch your escaped target beg for death. Unable to take a hint, Number 371 charges a largely indifferent Hisoka with all the courage of a wounded, cornered dog. You put him out of his misery.

"Sorry. I was careless and he got away."

Hisoka's facing away from you but you can *hear* the smirk in his voice. "Don't lie to me. I'll bet he begged you to fulfill his dying wish."

"I do like it when they beg."

"Hmm…" He cocks his head as if considering, "I wouldn't waste your time on men like that. The weak don't deserve sympathy."

If your facial structure wasn't completely frozen by a dozen needles, you would raise an eyebrow at that. "Oh? And what's your excuse for letting your prey get away?"

"I have standards, for one. I only spare those whose death would be a waste." He looks at you out of the corner of your eye, and you get the impression he's sending a message. You don't have the energy to decipher it.

"What about *this* man's badge?" Hisoka presses. "I assume you collected that, at the very least."

"Right here." You flash him the badge of Number 371. "That makes six points for me. Want this extra?" You toss him the badge you took from the sniper's corpse.

He catches it midair before weaving it through his fingers like a coin.

"And whose is this?"

"Someone who pointed a gun at me." This gets a chuckle out of him.

You use this opportunity to give your body a break from its needle-induced mutation. With every pin removed, you feel the pressure alleviate as the bones snap back into place.

"I do so love watching that."

"*I* certainly don't enjoy it. It gets exhausting after a while." You feel the muscles of your face relax, and the curtain of your hair falls over your shoulder once more. The overwhelming urge to nap overtakes you.

“Well,” you stretch your arms back enough to hear some joints pop, “I think I’m going to sleep until the deadline.” With that, you make quick work of burrowing into the ground– as good a shelter as any.

“Best of luck.”

Hisoka acknowledges you with a wink before standing up to find his own prey.

Sleep comes quickly.

Honestly, you’re surprised Killua didn’t pick up on it sooner.

The fearlessness of youth mixed with the arrogance of a prodigy. You’ll have to whip him back up into shape after this.

“I heard you stabbed Mother and Milluki.”

“...Pretty much.”

“Mother cried, you know…. Tears of joy. She was delighted to see her son all grown up.”

Killua said nothing. He shook like a leaf, his eyes bright with terror.

Good. He remembers fear.

“It’s funny, she actually asked me to check up on you a while back. You know how Mother gets when she sets her mind to things.” The threat hung over Killua until he could no longer bear to meet your eyes.

“What a coincidence that you so happened to take this exam at the same time I required a Hunter's license for a job!" You continue enthusiastically. "It must be fate.”

Killua's face is as easy to read as ever.

“You don’t *actually* want to become a hunter, do you?

“Uh– no,” your poor baby brother stammers, “I just felt like taking the exam.”

“Oh wonderful! Well that saves us a lot of time, then." Clapping your hands together, you close in on him. "After all,” You infuse a bit of extra nen in his needle: better he learn this lesson now. “You are not cut out to be a Hunter. Your purpose– your *only* purpose– is to be an assassin.”

Killua takes in a halting gasp of air. He seems to be having trouble breathing, which is strange; it's not as if any of this is new information. The entire room seems to be holding its breath as well, as if they've never seen a family reunion before. Even Hisoka's gaze feels loaded. You elect to ignore them all– you're here for Killua. You focus on the needle a little harder, before locking eyes with your brother. It's a precautionary measure, but just a twinge of hypnosis can often get your point across far better than words ever could.

"You're a puppet of darkness, devoid of passion." You coat each word in gentle poison. "The only pleasure you derive is from killing others– and even that is fleeting. It sustains you, drains you of any desire. *That* is how you were raised."

That is how we were all raised, my sweet, naive little brother.

You're tempted to recount stories of Mother ramming these very same lessons into your head. You have her to thank for much of your upbringing, after all. Your father only took interest in you when it came time to rear Killua.

Once you're all home, there will be time for gratitude. *These are the truths of this family, Killua. Nothing that hasn't been said before a hundred times by a hundred different people. This is how we love.*

"That's not- that's not true!"

"Oh?

"There *is* something I want!" He's bristling up like a porcupine. How cute.

"Enlighten me."

"I…" Killua looks more unsure of himself than Illumi had ever seen him. Truly, this weakness needs to be bled out of him before it spirals out of control. But you're a good big brother. You'll make sure that never happens.

"I want to be friends with Gon."

You almost laugh. *Gon Freecss, at it again; even when absent, he meddles.*

"Killua," you say, aiming for gentle, soft, brotherly, while you dig your nen into his prefrontal cortex, "Allow me to make myself clear: you are *incapable* of friendship. To assassins like us, *everyone* is a target."

Your eyes flicker over to Hisoka, his gaze on you weighing even heavier than before. *Shoo* , you want to say. *Let me handle this. Family business.* Your grip on Killua tightens– now is not the time to let him slip through your fingers.

"This is the only fate available to our family– and we were taught accordingly. Gon…" You gesture dismissively in the general direction of the door, "Is a radiant presence, a novelty that has piqued your curiosity. No more than that."

"You're wrong!"

“If you try to befriend him,” you continue, ignoring your brother’s outburst, “You’ll one day have the urge to kill him. You’ll want to see if you can.”

You pause, waiting for each word to settle in his innocent little brain.

“And you'll find out what his blood feels like on your hands.”

You feel Hisoka’s eyes on you. You keep yours on Killua.

“You are, by nature, a murderer.”

Killua shudders, then goes still.

And of course, by the end of the day, you are proven right.

Hisoka finds you after.

“Good show.”

You hum in agreement, busy typing out four different emails on your phone. The Zoldyck household must be aware that their prodigal son is returning.

He takes your casual disregard in stride, sauntering away like a cat with its belly full.

“Till next time, my friend.”

Your fingers stop moving over the phone-screen. He’s walking away but you can’t look up, can’t move, can’t think of anything as your own words play over and over in your head.

Puppet of darkness, devoid of passion-

Sustains you, drains you-

A radiant presence-

A novelty piqued your curiosity-

You are simply incapable of-

One day, you’ll find out-

You are, by nature–

A murderer.

Chapter End Notes

i cannot stress this enough: NOTHING illumi says to killua is remotely normal, ok, or justifiable. and also generational trauma is a thing that exists. we can hold both of these in are hands and say wow! that's fucked!!!!!

silver lining is that the siblings seem to be getting out, one by one, to varying degrees of success. (kalluto i hope the terrorist theatre kids are making you packed lunches and putting you to bed on time. alluka and killua im so proud of you make sure to ne*ver under any circumstances get on that fucking boat.* milluki im sorry your anime waifus can't stage you the intervention you so desperately need. illumi you and the clown deserve each other; i sincerely hope you elope and never come back.)

till next time!

Chapter 9: magician's palm

Chapter Summary

> ***"Magician's Palm"*** *refers to a classic technique in card manipulation in which a playing card, once flourished, is placed in the hand lengthwise while the hand curls inward, creating the illusion that the card has disappeared. In other words, a vanishing act.*

Chapter Notes

> i haven't gotten around to reading chapter 402 yet but the second i finish posting this i am SO jumping on that boat. (please support the official release)
>
> warning: some (brief!) but graphic descriptions of murder

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Killua's journey takes him back to your family home; yours has you leaving with Hisoka.

You don't think about the revelations you may or may not have had during the hunter exam. Not at all. In fact, you throw yourself so firmly into normalcy that even the famously-intrusive magician seems taken aback. Regardless, you spend a comfortable few weeks together, and strike up a routine in the meantime. You love routines.

"I'm flattered Illumi, I really am, by how you see it fit to welcome yourself into my personal space. But you *do* know that my one-bedroom apartment is not, in fact, a base of operations?"

"I'm aware," you reply, and swipe a tube of his lipgloss. You've been taking on more honeypot missions recently; the requests have always been there, but you've found yourself much more amenable to sex as of late. It's not exactly enjoyable, but it no longer inspires that profound discomfort you used to associate with the act. Regular sessions with Hisoka seem to have cured you of that bias. You wonder if you can chalk up this newest charade as a business expense.

On a completely unrelated note, you want to see if the honeypot missions will make Hisoka jealous. Only out of curiosity. After all, each piece of new information you learn about Hisoka goes right into your mental log of *things to use against him later*.

So far, it hasn't worked. This is disappointing only because you feel like your efforts are being wasted, and for no other reason. You keep trying anyway.

For research purposes.

"Help yourself," Hisoka huffs out as you return the lipgloss to its original place: strewn across Hisoka's cluttered vanity.

"Thank you," you reply, perfectly genuine. This seems to tick him off more. Must just be one of his prickly days.

You examine your appearance in the vanity's mirror, turning it this way and that. You were going for a youthful, innocent look. Perhaps a bit of blush could soften up your face. You eye the collection of makeup appliances before picking out a wide-bristled brush.

"Yours or mine?"

He lets out a heavy sigh. "The pink ones are all *mine,* Illumi. I bought those specifically so you'd stop mixing them up."

"Right," you say cheerily, and dig through the mess until you find a black brush of a similar size. A tin of blush sits conveniently atop the table, and you don't hesitate to help yourself.

Hisoka groans. "That one is *also* mine– ugh, why do I even bother." He takes one final, cursory look at his own painted face before walking out of the bathroom.

You don't answer him, because you've recognized this as a *rhetorical* question. You've been getting better at picking up on those.

Once he's left the bathroom, you pick up a thin pink brush and start working on your eyeshadow.

Sometimes you bring Hisoka along for the missions. As expected, the magician revels in the splendor of killing- especially when the client has put in special requests.

I want my husband to have his head severed and placed on a literal silver platter, or *I want you to castrate my business rival in front of his wife* , or *I want you to string up my former boss in his own entrails*.

One client even asked to have his target crucified.

Hisoka loved the showmanship of it all: "It's like performance art!"

Occasionally, he would even compliment the client's "remarkable vision," and claimed he may use it as inspiration. You have no doubt he could pull off those... maneuvers

exceptionally well.

When you tell him so, he kisses you so hard your gums bleed. He bites at your lips like he wants to reshape them, carve them into the perfect mold to fit against his own. You can't say you don't enjoy it– the intoxicating feeling of being desired, *possessed*. Not that the magician would ever be capable of such a feat… but you see no harm in indulging him. For now.

Personally, you don't feel one way or another about the artistic merits of murder. You charge extra and think nothing more of it.

You can take pride in the fact that your parents trained you to have remarkable business acumen.

The sex is more than satisfactory. But you also like the parts afterwards, when you're both quiet and breathless, and he opens the window to enjoy a quick cigarette.

Apparently, Hisoka used to smoke quite a bit; a few years ago he switched to some newfangled e-cigarettes once they started coming out with bubblegum flavors. You made him stop because you hated that pungent, saccharine smell. He acquiesced surprisingly quickly, and switched to a brand you both could tolerate.

You had picked up a cigarette habit yourself a few years back; initially it was merely a small, *small* rebellion against your parents (your mother in particular despised nicotine) and you wanted to have something you could only do outside of home. A way to prove to yourself that you could have these tiny rebellions while still being loyal to your family. It was a stupid stunt you pulled when you were 17, and the nicotine itself truly did nothing for you, but you grew to like the routine: the monotonous act of inhale, hold, exhale, watch the smoke rise away. And it was nothing more than an occasional indulgence.

To your surprise, you found yourself enjoying it even more with a– a companion. *Too intimate.* A person who shares your space. The routine felt even more reinforced, even more solid. You liked your smoke breaks: you liked feeling the sweat weighing down your eyelids and fatigue blurring the corners of your vision, the cold air hitting your face, and the smoke clouding your lungs. It was– in the words of Hisoka– a kind of sensory buffet.

You can't help but agree. For the first time in a while, you feel full.

"I'm moving out," he announces one day, out of the blue. You blink slowly at him, taking this information in.

“Of your own apartment?”

“Yes. I’ve decided to pursue a… lead I have in Padokea. The job- so to speak- comes with living arrangements, and *plenty* of built-in entertainment. I'll need to leave soon if I want to beat my target there.”

“So you’re just leaving.”

“I assure you, my new arrangements will undoubtedly be an upgrade. Besides, you know how I am– I don’t like to stay in one place for too long.”

“You’re leaving.”

“That’s what I said.”

“But you can’t,” you keep your tone neutral even as heat rises to your face. “You can’t just leave. You can’t just do whatever you want.”

He laughed then– loudly. A long, long laugh.

“Illumi,” he says almost pityingly, “As much as you may want to believe otherwise, you don’t own me.”

You’re immediately struck with the desire to prove him wrong– violently, if need be. But that’s ridiculous, because he’s *right*. To own something means to tend to it, care for it, control it, take responsibility for it, be invested in its future, and give yourself in service to it. At least, a piece of yourself.

You do none of these things for Hisoka. Nor do you want to.

“Well,” you reply stiffly, doing your best not to sound petulant; “Then I suppose I’ll head home.”

There’s no relief in that thought. *Home is no longer what it used to be*, you remind yourself, *but it is also certainly not here.*

You don’t know when you allowed yourself to forget that.

Probably around the same time you convinced yourself he wanted to possess you in the same way you wanted to possess him.

The next morning, you take the first flight out to Padokea, and then the shuttle to Kukuroo Mountain. Despite having a destination in common, you don’t hear from Hisoka for another two weeks.

Your mother welcomes you back with cold, open arms.

Chapter End Notes

guys. guys guys guys. i know this pairing loves to propagate the hisoka chasing illumi/ illumi running away narrative but there is so much missed potential in that reading of their characters. like between the two of them, illumi, is *inarguably* the more possessive one. hisoka is the one that wants no attachments and doesn't want to be tied down (read: commitment issues). exploring this side to their dynamic is soooo sooso interesting to me because deeply the draw of hisoillu is how, on paper, they seem completely incompatible- yet somehow it fucking works!! through acknowledging both their similarites and their differences they can grow... not to be better (god no) but at least more human.

and hisoka pulling back now is going to make the engagement- intrinsically an act of tying oneself to another-- all the more poignant.

see y'all next sunday!!!

Chapter 10: pepper's ghost

Chapter Summary

> ***"Pepper's ghost"*** *is an illusion technique in which an image of an object off-stage is projected so that it appears to be in front of the audience. Something that seems closer than it really is.*

Chapter Notes

> very touched by all the lovely comments i've been seeing recently. truly nothing motivates me more than knowing there's someone out there that enjoyed?? something i made?? crazy. thank you <3333
>
> CW: implied/referenced drug use

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You pick up the phone after an acceptable three rings. You now know that *eagerness* is too easy a weapon in Hisoka's hands.

"Hey doll…" he drawls, elongating the vowel in lazy disdain.

"Hisoka."

There is a beat of silence, both of you expecting the other to jump in.

"This is the part where you say ~to what do I owe the pleasure?" Hisoka whines, his voice taking on an airy, high-pitched lilt it does when he mimics you. You really hate it when he does that.

"You're making quite a lot of assumptions there."

"I suppose I am," he laughs, and there's a noise like he's just settled on a couch. "It seems rich kids have no need for manners."

You ignore that predictable dig at your upbringing and check your watch. Your flight is arriving in fifteen minutes, assuming there are no delays. It's been a while since you've flown on a commercial airline before, but according to your grandfather this job could be compromised if you showed up ostentatiously in a private jet. Too much attention.

"Hisoka, I have about ten minutes. I advise you to make it quick."

You hear him huff on the other end of the phone. “You’re no fun, did you know that? No fun at all.”

You pinch the furrow that's dug its way into your brow. “Hisoka, if you are inebriated I will hang up the phone right now. I have very little patience at the moment, so I would suggest you spend it wisely.”

You literally think you can hear him smirk.

“I haven’t had any alcohol yet, per se...” You can read between the lines. There are things other than alcohol that can loosen Hisoka up. You are about to hit the end call button when Hisoka airily adds: “I just had a visit from a Spider, by the way. Such a thrilling display of power.”

He wants you to think he got into a fight with the Phantom Troupe, but you don’t buy that for one second. If Hisoka was high off the rush of a fight against Chrollo Lucilfer, you would be having a very different phone call.

“How wonderful,” you snipe back. “Did they throw you a party? Do you want me to come pick you up?”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time!” He laughs. “Actually, I was left rather 'in the dust,' so to speak. Machi– the one with needle-and-thread, I think you’d like her– stopped by to reattach some of my limbs. I offered her to stay for dinner but it seems she had other plans.”

“Which limbs?”

“Pardon?”

“Which limbs needed re-attachment?” You repeat.

“My arms,” he says merrily. “I’m touched that you care.”

“I don’t.” You check your watch again. It’s almost boarding time. “I suppose I’m curious to see how this will impact your form in the future. If you can no longer fight there is no reason to continue our partnership.” You take pride in not stumbling over that last word. Flawless delivery.

“Oh I can assure you, I’ll be in top form. This isn’t the first time this has happened, and I expect it won’t be the last. That’s the brilliance of Machi, you see. Complete nerve reattachment! It’s practically good as new.”

You cluck your tongue, then scold yourself for acting like some kind of mother hen. It’s not your problem that Hisoka has no self-preservation instinct.

“Aren’t you going to ask me how it happened?” Hisoka says after a beat. “It's a good story.”

“You’re in Heaven’s Arena. I can put two and two together.”

He coos at you, “Oh, Illumi! I’m so touched you’re keeping track of my whereabouts— that sexy stalker thing has really grown on me, you know.”

“You are on TV, and I’ve spent far too much of this past week on commercial flights. They’re broadcasting your face from Kakin to Padokea.”

“And what a beautiful face it is!” Hisoka crowed. He had clearly taken something– the nature of which Illumi had no desire to discover. Perhaps few pills to numb the pain. Or perhaps not, considering his– appetites. You realize Hisoka is still speaking and try to tune back in.

“At a loss for words?”

“I didn’t hear you.”

“I asked if you’d watched the fight.”

“No,” Illumi said, inspecting his fingernails. “Even if I had a taste for such things, I have been preoccupied in the last 24 hours.”

“Secret family business, eh? Oh, don’t bristle,” he teased, “I know when not to pry.” You would challenge that statement if you had the patience for this conversation.

“Anyway, do you remember Kastro, that promising young enhancer? He was around the last time I was in Heaven’s Arena– and I do remember you turned up at some point.”

“I remember,” you say. And then, after a beat: “So, he’s dead then?”

“As a doornail!” Hisoka chortles, and you hear the sound of something spilling. Maybe he really had started drinking. “You should watch the replays. I’d love to know your thoughts.”

“I think I have a pretty good picture. And knowing you, your strategy was probably reckless and inefficient.You play with your food too much.”

“We all have appetites to whet, my dear Illumi.”

You hum in half-agreement. Ultimately, Hisoka is the creature he is. There’s no changing that.

“Speaking of appetites–”

“I am not going to have phone sex with you right now.”

“Aw, doll, why be so uptight?” He says, before switching to a slightly more pathetic, beseeching tone, “Machi just left me hanging dry, and I miss your mouth.”

“I’m in an airport.”

“Prude.”

“Whore.”

“Wuss.”

“I’m hanging up,” You say as you hear the boarding call overhead. “Enjoy your limbs.”

“God, you’re so un-fun. Enjoy your murder, I suppose. ” Hisoka sighed, and a hint of mischief crawled back into his voice. “Oh,” he says, like he only just remembered; “Killua’s here, by the way. Him and Gon just reached the two hundredth floor.”

You were waiting for him to get there. He’s hoping to rile you up and extort something out of you, whether it be confidential information or the aforementioned phone sex. You’re so, so eager to leave him hanging.

“I know.” You say evenly, then click off the phone. The matches have been broadcast worldwide, after all. It didn’t take a ‘stalker’– or an attentive older brother– to know exactly where Killua had spent the past few months. You know, your family knows, and the Zoldyck business will remain Zoldyck business.

But you knew he would try to involve himself anyway. You were waiting for him to play his cards. There’s nothing the magician hates quite as much as getting denied. There’s nothing you enjoy quite as much as denying him.

Chapter End Notes

another shorter chapter today. or, to be more accurate, after a string of chapters that were... longer than planned... i wanted to give us a breather before the upcoming yorknew saga !!

see y'all there :))

Chapter 11: needle-through-thumb trick

Chapter Summary

"Needle-through-thumb" *is a magic trick in which a performer appears to stab his own thumb using several sewing needles.*

Chapter Notes

for timeline purposes, this chapter begins before the phone-call of the last one, but ends after. chronologically the chapter 10 is sandwiched inside 11. hope it's not too confusing

CW: Minor self harm moment involving Illumi and needles, and canon-typical Zoldyck abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You wouldn't see Hisoka again until the Yorknew job. But this time you're prepared: you've been armed with a secret weapon.

A lesson you had to drill into your own head; one not easily learned.

Upon returning to the manor about a month ago, the first thing you did was try to speak with your mother. During the months you had spent away– under the pretext that your temporary relocation was for the convenience of your job– you hadn't much reason to communicate with her. It was your father who assigned you missions, so it was through him you'd kept in contact with the family. And Silva Zoldyck had never been much for conversation.

In the time you'd been absent from the estate, you had sent your father eleven different progress reports to keep him appraised of your ongoing work. He would demonstrate his approval in turn by handing out your next assignment. *Give and take*.

It was an efficient, well-maintained relationship you two had cultivated. You're very proud of it, and you have reason to believe he feels the same. Father *trusts* you to fulfill your responsibilities, and so made no protest when you announced you would be relocating for a bit. After all, it was far from the first time-- once you'd come of age, leaving home for a month or so here and there had become necessary for certain jobs. And physical distance was no cause for worry; you had proven time and time again that no matter how far you went or for how long you stayed away, the dutiful son would always return. This was a trust forged by steel tongs and the steady, earnest repetition of a hammer. Not easily made, not easily broken.

The shining example you'd set was likely the reason your father allowed Killua his little rebellion-adventure. You had shown that neither time nor distance could dull the truth etched in every helix of your DNA: family did not waver. A Zoldyck was-- and would forever be-- a Zoldyck

And a Zoldyck did not abandon its own.

So, yes: your father had faith in your loyalty. You, in turn, had faith he'd take care of the family in your absence. That he would show you the same honesty you show him: while you may not be the heir, you're still a vital part of the family. This was a right you had *earned*.

So, naturally, you are completely blindsided when you return home to find that your mother has fallen ill and you'd not even been informed.

Illness was not an unusual occurrence in itself; your mother had always been prone to-- *unique* fits.

But you had never seen her quite like this.

Your mother's illnesses were usually of the psychosomatic kind. The mind had always been trickier to heal than the body, and the fragility of Kikyo Zoldyck's mind was just short of a spiderweb. But normally– *normally* – her bouts of illness would have her oscillating between manic and depressed for a bit, until she finally settled back into stability. Sometimes, the mania could last months. Sometimes the depression would last longer.

All of this you knew how to deal with. You'd seen your mother depressed, yes– but you'd never seen her quite so *still*.

She'd be conscious but mostly unresponsive, all-but catatonic. Sometimes she would speak, but never directly *to* you. In all likelihood she was hallucinating, unable to tell reality from delusion; you didn't know how to convince her *you* were real.

You stay there for hours anyway.

Upon leaving her bedside for the first time since your return, your body jolts from the wave of emotions: first, a sudden burst of rage, then something akin to betrayal, then an oddly cold feeling, perhaps cousin of grief, then– nothing. You want to shake your mother back and forth, dig your claws into her until she snaps out of it. You want to hold her hand gently. You want her to hold you. You want to have a feeling that could last for more than a millisecond. You want to have no feelings at all.

You have always been your mother's son.

Your father is in his office. It was, for all intents and purposes, a surveillance room; decorated with security cameras and giant monitors and flooding fax machines. In the center of it all, your father reclines in his chair while sifting through a pile of documents. He doesn't turn around. After holding a brief staring contest with his broad back, you compose yourself and take a deep breath.

“You didn't tell me about Mother.”

“I didn’t see any reason to,” your father says, still not turning around. “She is in no real danger.”

You grit your teeth before you can think better of it. Another deep breath. You run your tongue along the inside of your molars and loosen your jaw. Your father was never much of a talker. This is not how you get through to him.

“… If I had come sooner, I'd have gladly cared for her.”

“She is receiving all the care she needs at the hands of butlers. You were needed elsewhere.”

Is that really what I was doing? You can't help but grind your teeth once more. *Being needed?*

“Do you know what brought it on this time?” You push out the question on your exhale, trying to keep your breath as quiet as possible so that your father wouldn’t mistake it for a sigh.

Silva Zoldyck is uninterested in offering you the same consideration. With a heavy, pointed sigh he turns in his chair and gives you a discerning look.

“Likely, it was spurred on by Killua’s second departure. You, of all people, must know how attached she gets.”

“But last time–”

“There is also the matter of Kalluto.”

You freeze. *That* was unprecedented. Kalluto almost never left your mother’s side– and yet, when you went to visit her chambers he was nowhere to be found. You had been so caught up in your own attempts at emotional regulation you hadn't even put the pieces together.

“Has he–” Your voice cracks just a bit, “Has he also…?”

“Kalluto is still within the premises. But he is…. wavering. I believe Killua’s departure may have affected him as well.”

You cannot repress the twitch of your fingers. They desperately splay through the air, trying to extend themselves beyond your joints. As if each one of them could pop out of their socket at any moment. *But that would be silly. A finger is no use without a hand.*

“He is also considering a-- a sabbatical?”

“We don’t know yet. I think it’s likely just a spark of childish rebellion. But for the past month or so he has stopped speaking with your mother. Most staff too. He has taken on all few missions, but always returns to the manor in isolation. With the absence of Killua and yourself–”

“I could have come back at any time–”

“*Silence*. You were not needed, therefore you were not called.”

“Father, if this is some kind of punishment--”

Your father did not rise from his chair. He did not move at all. And even so, in that moment, you felt like he had begun to grow larger. Or perhaps it was you who was shrinking.

“I will say this once last time: this does not concern you. I believe Kalluto and your mother had an argument– about what, I can only guess- and therefore it is up to *them* to resolve it. You cannot continue to interfere in matters that are not your own. Much less ones this petty."

You wrestle down the indignation surging in your chest. *Steady*. *This is not how you get through to your father.* You know this. You *know* this.

“Will you permit me to speak with Kalluto?”

“I will not.”

“Not about the matter with mother. I just think it might be beneficial to his education if I was a little more... involved.”

The Zoldyck patriarch raises a brow. The implication is clear: *you’ve meddled enough*.

“I have failed in my duties,” You continue, hoping he will see your altruistic intentions and unfailing loyalty and take them for what they are; “I do not wish to neglect one brother for another. If you would permit me to accompany him on a mission or two, I think it could solidify our bond.”

Your father’s eyes bore into you.

“And it has been a while since we’ve spent time together. I think it could be good…. for the both of us. I won’t involve myself in any of his other relationships. Just ours.”

Another sigh. You’re sure he sees how coiled you are, muscles tightened like a spring primed to strike.

“Very well, Illumi.”

You let a rush of breath escape you in something akin to relief.

“But see to it that you don’t compromise yourself." He waves his hand at you dismissively, before saying seemingly to himself, "Always too quick to get attached. Letting emotions rule over logic– just like your mother.”

You suppress a flinch just in time.

You are your mother’s son.

“Of course, Father,” You say stiffly, seriously. “I will take your words to heart.”

“See that you do.”

He turns his back to you once more. As you exit the office, Hisoka’s parting words ring in your ears.

You don’t own me.

Your father’s voice overlaps with that of the magician.

You get too easily attached.

Before going to your brother’s room, you must make a quick stop. Adjoining your bedroom suite is an office of your own– if it can be called that. It’s where you store documents; more importantly, it’s where you keep weaponry. You examine one of the long, thin needles lining the shelves of your arsenal. It fits comfortably between your fingers. Just the right size.

Typically, this technique isn’t meant to be used on adults. It works best when the brain is not fully formed, still malleable to manipulation– or rather, gentle *guidance*. Ideally inserted sometime during puberty.

You’d bestowed one on Killua when he was eleven years old. A good age– not too old that it wouldn’t take, but not so young that it could stagnate development. Still a few years under the typical cutoff point of sixteen, but there’s no harm in starting early. On that, you and your father were in perfect agreement.

You are twenty-four years old. The average human brain slows down development at the age of twenty-five. You have one more year.

The needle in your hand pulses with aura. You allow your nen to swarm it until the needle is almost completely obscured in darkness. It is vital you get this done before it’s too late. This correction is a necessary one.

The needle is carefully inserted into the base of your cranium, where the skull is softest. After a moment you pull away your fingers and there isn’t a drop of blood. The skin seals behind the needle. Now comes the command.

Detach *me*, you plead, feeling rather pathetic. *Let me keep a hold of myself. Let me never become my mother.*

When it comes to this technique, it's only the first word that really matters. That's what becomes the command, the override. The rest is little more than a prayer.

You feel the nen from the needle absorb into your own. It feels like slowly sinking into cool water. It feels like falling asleep.

You take a moment to adjust. You’ll probably have a difficult time sleeping tonight– maybe for a few days– but the side effects will come slowly and predictably, and they will be manageable.

It’s time to see your youngest brother.

As you walk through the foyer, you feel your grandfather’s assessing gaze from one of the balconies above. It’s heavy, like judgment. Or disappointment, perhaps.

Your mother’s son.

Zeno Zoldyck has never thought much of your mother, so naturally he's never thought much of you. Come to think of it, he has never thought much of anyone who didn’t sport the thick curls and white hair of a *true* Zoldyck.

You almost laugh with the relief of not being able to care.

Whereas your mother was unnaturally still, Kalluto is unnaturally energized. He almost vibrates with… what is it, anticipation? Impatience? Perhaps both.

Out of all your brothers, you have always found Kalluto the easiest to deal with. He is quiet to the point of being docile; and yet, the boy is always so *eager* to learn. He’s receptive to advice and loves to observe from afar. In many ways, he is like you.

You sincerely hope that will change. There are already two versions of your mother running around the house; it would be a waste for Kalluto to follow.

Silva and Zeno are still accommodating towards the youngest Zoldyck. Your grandfather practically dotes on him. You try to remember if there was a time when Zeno doted on Milluki… maybe back when your brother was still very, very young. Perhaps your grandpa had once been like that with you, even. But there’s no use dwelling on the past now, or trying to get it back; affection is something a Zoldyck can grow out of.

You worry for Kalluto, for how easily he gets attached. He has no needles in his head– yet. There is still time to transition him out of this state of singular, maternal codependence.

You believe Kalluto returns your affection. At the very least, he exhibits all the same signs that you would at his age. He opens up to you more than anyone else– aside from Mother, of course.

So you’ll take him on missions with you and have him walk in your footsteps without falling into your shadow.

It seems to be producing results. You have no way of knowing whether or not Kalluto has spoken to your mother, and you promised your father not to get involved. But she does start getting better; after a month, Kikyo Zoldyck is more or less back to her old self.

When you go to see her again, her single eye is sharp and awake. The bandages she’s worn for so long are slipping. It doesn’t take long for her to fly into a rage.

You feel relief as she screams and claws at your face, demanding you return Kalluto to her side, spitting at you for separating her from another child. Finally, she is the mother you know.

You guide her to a chair as her screams turn to sobs. Now she holds your face and apologizes over and over, tells you that you've been a dutiful son, assures you she is well, pleads that you scratch at her face the way she scratched at yours to punish her.

There's no harm done--

Thank you, mother--

I'm relieved--

That won't be necessary--

She's up out of the chair again, pacing tracks into the floor, her long nightgown dragging behind her. She cries that you've been gone so long, asks if you even care about your poor dear mother, warns that next time there will be punishment, makes you promise that you will not fail Kalluto as you did Killua.

I'm sorry.

Of course I do.

I understand.

I promise.

You leave the room feeling relieved beyond measure. Kalluto trails behind you. It's good to be home. You can't remember why you stayed gone so long in the first place.

When you receive a request from the leader of the Phantom Troupe, you consult your father before accepting. After all, he has warned you away from the Troupe before. But it would be bad business to refuse such a well-paying client, you reason. And since you were reached out to by Chrollo personally, you think it prudent to cultivate the business opportunity you've been presented with.

Silva approves the mission and explains that you and he will now be working at odds. It turns out that they had received two requests: one from the Mafia, and one from the Spiders. This doesn't phase you. The Zoldycks are, above all else, professionals.

You had planned to leave Kalluto behind for this one, deeming it slightly above their current skill level. But you've been training him in *nen* recently, and he argues that this will be a good opportunity to test his skills while still having his big brother as a safety net.

To absolutely everyone's shock, great-grandpa Maha decides to come as well. It's been years since you've even seen him, much had him on a mission. He doesn't speak to you: just gestures to the door and follows your steps, watching. He doesn't watch in the way Kalluto does (observant and curious), or the way Grandpa Zeno does (scrutinizing and all-knowing): his gaze just feels distant. Detached.

Perhaps this is the wisdom that comes with age.

Regardless, the job went as smoothly as could be expected. Kalluto shadowed, Maha observed, and you performed your duties. Pride blooms ever so slightly in your chest when you find you've beaten your father and grandfather to the punch, executing your mission faster than they could theirs. No more Spiders will lose their lives today; and more importantly, neither will the Zoldycks.

After it's all said and done, you go to meet Chrollo as requested. You're not entirely sure why he wants to do this in person– it's only a wire transfer, after all– but you have no reason to object to your client's wishes. The location he sent to your phone is on the outskirts of the city. You would rather not bring your little brother to such a place, but when you try to send Kalluto home with Maha he makes a fuss about not wanting to be treated like a kid (which is exactly what he is). You eventually have to acquiesce. You're not even sure your great-grandfather (or is it great-great?) won't just wander off somewhere and leave his nine-year-old great-something grandchild to fend for himself.

So the two of you together go off to meet the Spider's head in a pastry shop.

It's a nicer venue than you were anticipating, for something so far from the central hub of Yorknew. Chrollo is already waiting at a table outside with a book, scarf wrapped around his forehead, looking completely at home in the environment. From what you remember of Chrollo in your very few missions, he's a chameleon of sorts: good at blending in wherever he goes.

"Illumi," he says, and looks up from his book with a warm smile that you're certain is manufactured. "I'm glad you were able to make it."

You sit down stiffly, slightly perturbed by the casual use of your first name. *How very familiar of him*. Kalluto hovers at your side, unsure of what to do. You offer him a slight nod towards the chair next to you, and he quickly pulls it out and settles down, eying Chrollo with his typical earnest curiosity.

"I'm glad we were able to provide you with the desired results."

Chrollo smiles and turns his gaze at Kalluto. "And who is this?"

Kalluto stares wide-eyed, before looking up at you as if asking for permission. You nod slightly. When it comes to Zoldyck family affairs, Chrollo already knows more than most. There is no current benefit to alienating a worthwhile client. And it would be good for Kalluto to start building a name for himself. It's true: he won't be a child forever.

Speaking of which…

“Kalluto,” announces your youngest sibling, tone neutral and detached. You’re very proud to witness him grow so much in such a short time. “Illumi’s my older brother.”

Chrollo is still wearing that warm, open expression. “Well, I can certainly see the family resemblance.”

You and Kalluto nod mutely in tandem.

The Spider looks between the siblings with a discerning gaze.

“I asked to meet in-person because I’d like to make a proposal.”

“All jobs must be booked online, I’m afraid. Protocol necessitates they go through our encryption system first.”

“Ah,” Chrollo says enigmatically, “But this isn’t exactly a job.”

You have a good idea of what he is about to say next. You keep an eye on Kalluto, making sure he knows to copy your behavior.

“I wanted to extend an invitation to join the Phantom Troupe.”

Next to you, Kalluto stiffens. An onlooker may label it as a reaction of discomfort, but you know your brother; you can recognize what this is. *Anticipation. Curiosity. Excitement.*

“I’ll have to decline." You make sure your response is polite but immediate. There can be no misunderstandings today.

Chrollo gives you a look that is too… knowing. It makes your skin crawl; this man is a stranger, an outsider. He knows nothing.

“I had a feeling that would be the case,” he sighs, maintaining that infuriatingly friendly disposition. “But I felt I had to at least try.”

So quick to replace one of your own, You want to bite back. *How long did you let your comrade lay in the grave before setting your sights on something else?*

But you don’t say that, of course. It wouldn’t be professional.

“Should you require our services in the future, you may reach us through the proper channels. If there is nothing else we’ll be taking our leave.”

Chrollo’s smile is toothier than before. “If you’ll permit me one more transgression, I’d like to make it clear that the offer stands regardless. Consider it an open invitation.”

You almost lose your grip on the bloodlust you’ve kept so perfectly maintained. Was this man so arrogant as to threaten and undermine you in front of your youngest brother? You shove the fury down into the dark pit you’ve created in your head, where all other emotions go. Not a trickle of anger leaks out.

But, to your frustration, Chrollo's dons an expression that seems to suggest he sees right through you.

"We appreciate your patronage, Chrollo Lucilfer," you say neutrally, rising from your chair. "We'll be expecting that wire transfer at your earliest convenience."

He's still wearing that aloof, all-too-knowing expression. You wonder what it would take to make him drop the act. Attacking him?

Attacking one of his precious Spiders?

Perhaps one day, you'll find out. But for now, you take Kalluto's hand firmly in your own and lead him out of the Spider's sight. You can feel your baby brother dragging a bit behind you, steps slowing as he looks back to the beckoning Spider.

Out of the corner of your eye, Chrollo gives you both a cheery wave.

A painless mission, you remind yourself. A painless, efficient, well-executed mission. There's no reason to get so worked up.

Inhale. Exhale. ***Detach***.

Thank god for your secret weapon.

You receive another mission for your father– another hit in Yorknew. You'll have to stay in the city for a few more days.

This time you *do* put your foot down and make Kalluto go home on the first airship you can book. It wasn't safe– not as he was now. There is blood in the water of Yorknew city, and you can practically smell the oncoming storm.

And like a bad omen sensing its cue, Hisoka chooses this moment to reappear on stage.

Chapter End Notes

i said i wasn't going to split yorknew up into two chapters but i lied. whoopsie

that being said, this chapter is meant to explore a bit more of illumi's dyanmic with his family, particularly his mom and kalluto. i think illumi as the eldest and kalluto as the youngest kind of uniquely bookend the family, and both have been heavily influenced

by their mother. [note: illumi uses he/him pronouns for kalluto because internalized transphobia / general assholery. this is not indicative of my personal views - ain't no way kalluto is cis - but you know the drill by now. unreliable narration unlikeable characterization and all that.]
we're also setting up some stuff with the troupe in the future... hints of kuroillu because i can't help myself.... but hisoka is coming soon. i promise.

(timeline note: the convo with chrollo, illumi, and kalluto takes place after the mafia takedown (uvogin's requiem) but before pakunoda's death and chrollo's loss of nen. i think he was undoubtedly affected by uvogin's death but still holding it together enough to prioritize troupe business-- he was probably already predicting hisoka's betrayal and this was partially meant as a countermeasure. take that as you will.)

Chapter 12: the prisoner's dilemna

Chapter Summary

> ***"The Prisoner's Dilemna"*** *is a thought experiment meant to demonstrate how two people might not cooperate even if it is in both their best interests to do so.*

Chapter Notes

> sorry i'm late the nyc marathon was today and it gave me some minor brain damage. then i was hit in the head once more by chapter 405, causing severe internal bleeding and feeding the brainworms that have been lying dormant waiting for their moment to strike. now i have MAJOR brain damage.
>
> everyone say welcome back babygirl ♤♡♢♧

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It doesn't take long before you are- once again- caught in the Spiders' web.

You had finished your newest contract at the behest of your father, and found yourself enjoying a coffee in Yorknew's central park. Over two miles long and half-a-mile wide, the park was this city's curated last bastion of nature. The wilderness had long since been driven out of those manicured lawns– trees replanted and grass trimmed and animals expelled– but to residents of the Yorknew *this* was enough. This was all it took to make people feel connected with nature: a few square acres of well-maintained lawns, belligerent wildfowl, and fast food vendors haphazardly stacked on top of each other.

Kukuroo Mountain had never looked remotely like this park; the Zoldycks had never even tried to tame their ancestral home. The woods were filled with dark, towering trees and overgrown topiary, and the caves that speckled the mountain housed the fiercest predators Padokea had to offer. Sometimes, a Zoldyck would be cast out of the house and told they had one month to survive the shivering woods.

An essential component of training, but not one you particularly enjoyed withstanding. You find yourself preferring this well-manicured version of nature. Chaos given way to order.

The park had kept your attention for so long– you were watching the wind run its fingers through the trees and rustling their leaves– that you barely even registered the approaching figures until they loomed over you. You look up to meet the eyes of… the stitching woman– Machi, that was it – and the samurai who's name you never bothered to learn.

As if privy to your thoughts, the samurai lays it on thick with the introductions: “The name is Nobunaga Hazama– shame we didn’t get acquainted earlier, after you *so kindly* did our boss a favor.”

“It was a transaction, not a favor,” you explain, as benevolently as possible, “I was paid.”

Nobunaga looks at you incredulously.

“I was compensated for my work,” you elaborate, “The notion may be new to someone with your upbringing, but that is generally how jobs are done these days.”

“Listen here, you little *shit* –” Nobunaga snarls, hand inching closer and closer to his sword; the two seemed magnetized. “I know perfectly well what payment is! And I *know* Chrollo paid you, I was being sarcastic– oh, yeah, how about I explain the word 'sarcasm' to you, since you seem so goddamn educated–”

“Enough, Nobunaga,” Machi stepped in, elbowing him in the side. “We’re not here to fight. If you can’t behave yourself–”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.”

You feel sincerely surprised by this man’s reaction. Is this the kind of company Chrollo Lucilfer keeps? Was the fearsome band of villains stacked with incompetent morons? For a moment, you almost pity their boss.

Then you hastily remind yourself that Chrollo Lucilfer neither needs nor deserves your sympathy.

“If your leader wishes to book a job with me, he can go through our regular channels." You aim for a haughty tone. Maybe it will drive the other one off. "Contact by email is also acceptable.

Machi examines you with intense scrutiny. “This isn’t a job, per se…”

“I am not joining you.”

“And thank god for that!” Nobunaga says, throwing his hands in the air. You were right before; this man does have a short fuse.

“Cool off, Nobu!” Machi hisses.

“Fine,” he harrumphed, turning his back on you indignantly. “I’ll go take a walk.” He stomps off towards the park, hands stuffed in his robes, mumbling something about '*condescending bastards*.'

You wish you could be taking a walk right now. Instead Machi is sitting opposite you and wielding that same scrutinizing gaze.

“This will go a lot quicker if you get to the point.”

“Alright,” Machi exhales, pulling herself a bit more together for you.

She’s familiar in a way; like looking in a funhouse mirror version of yourself. *Hisoka had said he was fond of her.*

Machi is clearly on the same wavelength: “We came for information on Hisoka.”

You can’t help but sit up straighter, hone in on the Spider's smaller figure. There’s a certain thrill to being solicited for secrets. It means you’re needed. It means they’re vulnerable.

“Who did he kill?”

Machi raises one of her sharply arched eyebrows, “Is that the first conclusion you draw?”

“Gathering information on him is understandable if he had only just joined your ranks,” You explain patiently, “But Hisoka has been a member of the Phantom Troupe for over a year now. He and I have been… associated for even longer. Fairly publicly, I might add . Approaching me now when you never had before suggests that our mutual acquaintance has recently done something that established him as a threat or liability. So, I’ll rephrase my question: what has Hisoka done this time?”

Machi levels you with a look you shall choose to interpret as begrudging respect. *He was fond of her.* You can see why.

“We have recently… come across an ability that is able to predict an individual's future...”

By ‘come across,’ you assume she means ‘stolen.’ You are well aware of Chrollo’s abilities– while your father warned you to stay away from the Spiders, he would never send you in unprepared. Father had long since imparted his knowledge of Chrollo’s nen technique (as much as he had deduced during their first fight, anyway), though he’d hoped you’d never have to use it. Not to mention that Chrollo himself had offered a few new tidbits when he’d first contacted you– probably his way of laying down collateral. *Show you mine if you show me yours*, and all that. Regardless, it was utterly pointless for Machi to try and hide the fact that her boss could steal abilities, but you could appreciate her loyalty.

“...and when Hisoka had his future read,” she continues, unaware or uncaring of the fact that you’ve been zoning out for the past minute, “It said he'd betrayed the Spider. Hisoka sold us out to the chain user: exposing our abilities, our center of operations, and who knows what else. He won’t tell us. Or rather, he can’t tell us. That’s what the boss believes, at least. He thinks the chain user may have inflicted some kind of condition on Hisoka that forced him to betray us, while preventing him from revealing it.”

You highly doubt anyone, nen contract or not, could make Hisoka do anything he doesn’t want to do. Had he wanted to find a loophole, he would have. And if this ‘chain user’ is who you suspect, then Hisoka is likely going on with this scheme entirely of his own free will.

At least, that would be your educated guess. One that you would need to be plied with a healthy sum of money to reveal.

“I’m pretty sure Hisoka’s fortune was the final nail in the coffin that convinced Chrollo to stay in Yorknew. And, while I’m always going to defer to the boss on these things… I have a hunch that there’s more to the story than Hisoka is revealing. Or rather, more than he is *choosing* to reveal.”

Good instincts. She’s clever, this Machi. She would make an excellent ally– something Hisoka likely already discerned.

Although, you doubt he would stop at a mere alliance.

Insatiable to his core.

“Hisoka’s taken… an interest in me before,” she says, as if sensing your train of thought, “But never confided much of anything. He seems completely unconcerned about the past; I suppose it doesn’t interest him. He’ll offer up meaningless trivia unprompted, but has never once spoken of his personal history, or anything that could explain why he is the way he is. We don’t even really know where he came from–”

“Glam Gas Land.”

She seems surprised at how readily you donated this information. You’re a little surprised yourself. It’s not like you have anything to prove.

“Huh. Some of us had guessed that he was also from Meteor City, since Shal couldn’t find any birth records on the web. But it figures he’d be from a place like that.”

“Like ‘*that* ’?”

“They call it '*The Pleasure Capital'* in Saherta, don’t they? Seems like a good birthplace for hedonism.”

“Ah, yes,” You’d never thought much about it; “I suppose that does make sense.”

“So, what else do you know? Like you said, it’s no secret that you two have been ‘associated’-” You’re a bit taken aback by how she sneers at the word, “-For a while now. Nobu and I figured that if anyone would have information on him, it’d be you.”

You pick up on the undercurrent of her words.

“You and the swordsman? No one else?”

“Well… to be honest, Chrollo doesn’t know we’re here. The Troupe has been split on how to handle Hisoka for a while now: some are cooperating with the boss's plan to the T, and some just don’t care enough to do anything about it,” She grits her teeth and glowers at no one, “But Nobu and I– along with Paku and Phinks– thought it wouldn’t hurt to do a bit of reconnaissance in the meantime. But we can *pay* !” She emphasizes the last word, seeing the expression on your face. “Whatever you have. Whatever could give us the edge over him; we want it.”

A dilemma unfolds before you. Telling Machi and the ‘renegade’ members of the Troupe everything you know could sour your business relationship with not only Hisoka, but their leader as well. And as much of an odious impression Chrollo Lucilfer left upon you during your last conversation… it would be foolish to throw away the opportunity of future cooperation. The more you work with him, the more opportunities you’ll have to gather *his* secrets. If you received a hit against him one day, you’d like as much ammunition as possible– to prove to your Father you are capable of this job, if nothing else. And, most importantly: it would simply be bad business.

But if you’re completely honest with yourself, there's only one reason that comes to mind when you refuse her offer.

“I’m afraid I cannot help you."

She doesn't look happy, but she doesn't look surprised. She's hard to read, this Machi. It keeps you on your toes.

"It’s not merely that I’m looking out for my own business interests, or that I feel the need to remain loyal to a past client: to be clear, I couldn’t care less whether Hisoka lives or dies. But the fact of the matter is that you were right earlier: Hisoka doesn’t care about the past. He doesn’t cultivate privacy to protect some big secret." *Although he certainly encourages the mystique.*

"I’ve done some digging on my own end,” *(or rather, Milluki did),* “And there’s nothing. And not in the way that points to a cover-up: I mean there's just nothing of note. No birth records, no family, no property deeds. There’s a few jobs on record, but it’s a stunningly average resumé. Nothing that could possibly explain 'why he is the way he is'.”

Machi looks at you, expression growing more and more inscrutable. There’s an equally unidentifiable need bubbling up in you– whether it’s a desire to explain yourself, to justify your relationship with him, to not let her leave disappointed, or to prove that you're the only person in the world who knows even *this* much about Hisoka– you can’t tell. So you push it aside with the rest of the useless clutter in your brain.

“The truth is that I’ve known Hisoka for longer than he’s known me.”

You’ve never told anyone that before.

“Because he’s forgotten,” your mouth continues moving on autopilot, “He’s discarded anything which has ceased to be relevant. I think he looks upon those of us still trapped within the shadows of our own pasts with pity; he thinks we’re *primitive* .”

It’s incredulous to even say out loud. Hisoka resembles a wild beast more than anyone you’ve ever met– with the exception, perhaps, of that little upstart Gon Freecss– yet he acts like *you’re* the unevolved one.

Ridiculous, says a voice that may belong to your mother.

Insulting, echoes a voice that sounds like your father.

You agree wholeheartedly because you are your mother and your father's son.

You remain perfectly still in your chair, but the blood beneath your skin boils. He is an infuriating mistake of nature. You can only hope that you'll someday be the one to put him out of his misery.

Machi doesn't tense at your bloodlust, but she does wrinkle her nose as if she's taken in a bad odor.

"Look, I believe you," she sighs, "But would you mind toning down the aura? At this rate you're gonna give me indigestion."

"Of course." You gather yourself, imagining sealing off each pore in your body until calm spreads back through you. The needle in your head pulses, and then you're met with a final, gentle silence. "I wish you luck."

Machi scoffs. "Luck is for magicians. I don't gamble with fate," She raises her chin defiantly. "And neither does Chrollo."

You give her a curt nod. "Then I wish your enemies a painful death."

She lets out a throaty laugh.

"Now *that* I can drink to."

Machi walks away from your table to rejoin her samurai friend and you're left once more in the company of this lovely park.

You take another sip of your coffee. It's gone cold.

> ๖ ^_–☆ two million jenny ♧

It's the first you've heard from Hisoka since arriving in Yorknew. Hardly a grand (re)entrance; the magician still manages to subvert your expectations.

What's the job <<

You'll give him no more than he's given you.

> the spiders have huddled together in their little hideout, and no one is allowed to leave. i'll need you to stand in as my replacement ♢

For how long? Without needles, I can only maintain a disguise for a few hours <<

> should be more than enough

> fooling the troupe won't be too hard. they're already crumbling without their precious boss ♤

Well, that is quite the development. Your fingers hover over the screen for a few moments, composing your thoughts. And, as if he's got some kind of sixth sense for your emotional turbulence, he continues.

> ***can you believe it? Chrollo got himself kidnapped by our little Kurapika (◔ ‾▽‾ ☆)***

> he's all grown up and calling himself the 'chain user' now

And you've been feeding him information on the Spiders in the hope you'll get << the chance to fight Chrollo

You already know the answer.

> my my, have you been spying on me?

> how cute ◇

I was approached by a few Spiders the other day, asking for information on you <<

> ooooh? and what did you tell them ♤

That it wasn't worth their time <<

> good answer ◔ ^_– ☆

Your reticence in talking about your past has paid off <<

> darling, you make it seem so calculated ♡

Was it not <<

> ʅ (ﾉ‿ﾉ) ʃ

Ugh. As annoyingly nebulous as ever.

Very well then. I suppose I've known you longer than Chrollo <<

But it will cost you. Up front <<

> ***no can do, i'm afraid. that little tyke Shalnark went and confiscated everyone's phones (◔ -̯-̯-☆)***

> i'm texting you from a burner and it can't do wire transfers

> but i'll send you the location. if you don't trust me to keep my word, you can put a needle in my head when we swap ♧

> ***oh, and i've booked a room to meet up afterwards. so that we can…. debrief ♡***

You have a good idea of what Hisoka imagines 'debriefing' will entail. You ignore the stirring in your gut and refocus your mind on *business* .

I still require collateral. To ensure I'll get paid regardless of whether or not the << **fight goes your way**

> so little faith....

> have you ever known me to lose?

There's a first time for everything. I'd prefer this not be *my* first time not << **getting paid**

> ha! how grim. ♤♢

> what do you want me to do, write you a prenup? add you to my will and sign away all my earthly possessions? ♧♤♡♢

You ignore his taunting. *Focus on the business at hand.*

I doubt you even have a will <<

> (☆–__–☆) …

You're aware the clock is ticking. If you're going to lose a client today, you know who you'd rather it be.

Fine. Just this once, and only because of the time constraint. I will not be << **making exceptions for you in the future**

And we'll have to set up a system of collateral should a situation like this happen<< **again**

> ***aw, already planning our future together? how sweet ♡***

> i knew there was an optimist somewhere deep inside that cold dead heart ♤

You're pushing your luck, Hisoka<<

Luck is for magicians, Machi had said.

> ***always ♡♡♡***

The Troupe doesn't gamble with fate.

How long will it be, you wonder: *How long until Hisoka finds himself up against odds even he cannot hope to challenge?*

"I just heard about Chrollo," is the first thing you say when Hisoka stomps through the door of your shared hotel room.

"Bummer."

He gives you a glare that could melt a glacier, but says nothing.

How unusually tight-lipped.

"Such a shame," you find your voice lilting into an almost sing-song tone. Is this teasing? "For Chrollo to go down in such an anticlimactic way. Some may say it besmirches the reputation of the entire Spider. They're practically in shambles now- I don't know if they'll even be able to afford me in the future–"

Hisoka slams you into the wall, breath harsh, eyes glittering with malice. He has his shirt off for some reason. His nails dig into your throat.

"I'm not in the mood for shithead antics," he spits, "So I would really choose your words wisely from here on out."

He tightens his grip on your throat and you wonder what color the bruises will turn out.

"I'm still amped up from the sheer anticipation of it all, and trust me, if there's one thing I can't stand it's getting blueballed like that." He's close enough that you can feel his hot breath on your face. "I could do anything to you right now. Don't give me a reason to."

"Funny," you're proud of how level your voice is, even with your windpipe being crushed, "That's usually my line."

You're not quite sure what's gotten into you tonight. Perhaps you have appetites too.

Or maybe you just want to do something reckless and stupid. Maybe you also want a turn at the gambling table of fate.

He has an inch or so on you, even without heels, and he's pushing you against the wall high enough that your feet are dangling. You correct this by wrapping your legs around his waist.

"You threaten me with a little pain like that's supposed to scare me," you whisper, pulling his body closer to you, your hands finding purchase on his chest, shoulders, in his hair.

“Go on then. Get it out of your system. Do your worst. You and I both know I can take it.”

He’s on you in an instant, a swarm of piranhas. You wager that by the end of the night there will be enough blood and teeth to warrant the comparison.

Hurt me , you find yourself saying over and over; *hurt me hurt me hurt me hurt me–*

You’re still chanting it when you come.

When the hotel tries to charge you a ridiculously steep fee for property damages, you merrily forward the bill to Hisoka.

Perhaps this is what *collateral* looks like between men like you.

Chapter End Notes

tbh this is probably the closest these two can get to therapy. (listen i'm not gonna say getting dicked down would fix illumi... but guys i think getting dicked down might fix illumi. the paradox here is that theres a good chance getting laid might be making hisoka actively worse)

oh also many many thanks to all the lovely commentors I've been getting, y'all really do make the world go round. see everyone next sunday

P.S. hot people stan machi <3

Chapter 13: miser's dream

Chapter Summary

> ***"Miser's Dream"*** *is a crowd-pleasing magic routine wherein a magician produces coins from thin air and drops them into a metal bucket. The secret method behind the trick involves palming.*

Chapter Notes

> damn and i had such a streak going 😔
>
> CW: hisoka

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You get the call from your mother while bent over the sink, attempting to wash the blood and gore out of your hair. Sometimes it takes dredging up every ounce of vanity you have– which amounts to more than you'd like to admit- in order to talk yourself out of picking up a pair of shears and having a go.

"It's Kalluto–!"

Mother doesn't waste a breath. You can hear her shuddering on the other end, voice bitter and broken. For a moment, there's an extraordinary sense of dejá vu. And then you remember that no, it's not a trick of the mind– this has happened before.

It keeps happening.

"My baby– Oh Illu, my *baby* is gone!"

Perhaps you should have seen this coming. Perhaps you *all* should have seen this coming. You recall your last visit to the estate, your mother's fragmented psyche, Kalluto's withdrawal. In your mind you see the smiling face of Chrollo, invitation extended, and you yank your hand out of the messy tangle of your hair so violently it tears. A clump of black hair wriggles through your stained hands and disgust, disgust, *disgust* rises from your throat and upheaves into the sink.

Your mother's cries echo from the tiny receiver of your phone.

"Illu… baby, are you still there? Illu!? Illumi!!!"

Bile swims in the sink below. You wipe your mouth with the back of your hand– the only part that isn't covered in blood– and pick the phone back up to your ear.

"Yes, mother. I'm here."

The words echo into the tinny phone receiver, traveling miles and miles before they reach anything approximating home.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

"Illumi," Hisoka sighs into the phone's receiver, sounding less than pleased.

You don't bother with formalities. "Hisoka, where are you."

"Well, as I'm *sure* you know," He grouses, petty as ever; "I'm at my apartment. I just got back from my little rendezvous with the Troupe on Greed Island, so I've been a little busy."

"Oh, good, so you have made contact with the Spiders."

As if you don't already know the answer.

"....Yes."

"Perfect." And it is. You've never been more grateful to have cultivated a business relationship with this– this charlatan. Give and take; now it's your turn. "I've had Milluki mail you some custom-made spyware."

"Yeah, that's why I'm calling–"

"As I'm sure you're now aware, my youngest brother Kalluto has run off to join the Phantom Troupe. My mother's not too pleased."

It's not shyness or reticence that causes you to omit your own reaction from the story. It's just that your mother's feelings have always been in a league of their own. Overtaking everyone and everything else like a black hole.

You're ever so lucky she provides the gravity you need.

(How else would a child know up from down without gravity? How else would a child know right from wrong without a mother?)

Of course, *you* know how to be grateful. Your brothers' still have a few lessons to learn.

Hisoka sighs on the other end, the kind of bemused *huff* that you know from experience is trying to communicate how stupid he thinks you are. "That much I can piece together, Illumi.

I mean, for fuck's sake– I have enough cable cord in here to strangle an elephant! There is no way you could expect me to operate this."

So he's upset because he thinks you've *over* estimated his technological prowess? Surely he would take such a thing as a compliment– even if you hadn't meant it as such. Honestly, what kind of grown man doesn't know how to plant a simple bug?

You try to placate him anyway, because you really would like this done and you really don't want to fight.

"It's not like it's hard."

Nailed it. Worries assuaged.

"You are unbelievable. That's not my poin–"

"-It's only the receiver you have to plant on Kalluto, the rest is operated remotely–"

"-Would it kill you to let me finish a sentence–"

"- I would do it myself, but my father has forbidden my involvement with both the Troupe *and* Kalluto for the time being. He's not exactly happy about the whole situation, but he doesn't want to encourage me and my mother's 'paranoid tendencies.' So all I need you to do–"

"-Paranoid tendencies is a *light* way of putting it."

"-At your earliest convenience–"

The line went dead. You stare at your phone in shock for a grand total of four seconds before dialing his number again.

He picks up on the third ring, as if he's trying to teach you patience. That bastard.

"You hung up on me."

"Yes, darling, I did. Conversations typically go two ways, and you weren't listening to a word I had to say."

You can't actually refute that.

"What I was trying to express, Illumi," Hisoka says, tone dripping with honeyed condescension, "Is that I have no intention of planting *any* sort of spyware on *anyone* right now, much less a member of the Phantom Troupe– you know, the same Troupe that is only cooperating with me out of desperation, and would be happy to serve my head up on a platter to their boss."

Your mouth twists at that. "What, you're *afraid* of the Spiders?"

"*Please*," You can practically hear his eyes roll, "No need to insult me. Of course I'm not afraid of them– I'd normally welcome the chance to kill a Spider– but I *do* need their cooperation until we restore Chrollo's nen. And they're all so tetchy these days– even Machi is giving me the cold shoulder."

"Machi has always given you the cold shoulder. She doesn't like you."

"Well that's just rude," You're certain he's currently affecting an exaggerated pout, "And since when do *you* know Machi?"

"We met in Yorknew– so wait, have you or have you not made contact with the Troupe? Have you even seen Kalluto?"

"Yes to the first, kind-of to the second. Your little brother's *zetsu* is very sophisticated for his age. I sensed him spying on me during a little parlay with the Troupe– at their request– but we didn't exactly exchange words."

"Ah."

Well, that wasn't what you'd been hoping for.

"Mhm."

Damn.

"So… do you think the Spiders would take it as a breach of trust to plant spyware on one of their members…. even if it's with his family's permission?"

Hisoka laughs at you for a solid thirty seconds. You're gripping your phone screen so hard it cracks.

Must I do everything myself?

"Yes, as hilarious as it would be to show up with a little permission slip from you, I think I'll have to pass."

You're not sure why the idea is so ridiculous. Is it not the practice for children to bring signed permission slips when they go on school trips? Why would this be so different?

"And more importantly," Hisoka continues, "It sounds boring. I'm not a tech guy- never had much luck with the stuff. I've also got a lead on an exorcist back in Greed Island, so now's not the time to be going on sidequests. I came back to grab some stuff from my apartment, and then I'll be going right back to work."

Now it's your turn to sigh. As frustrating as he's being, you cannot find fault with Hisoka's logic. You wouldn't take off in the middle of a job either.

Moreover, his incompetence here is a reminder of a lesson you should have learned a long time ago.

“Very well, I’ll figure something out on my own. Have fun with your little game.”

“Oh, I most certainly am. Ta - ta!”

This time *you* hang up before he’s finished– evening the score.

If you want something done right, you’ll have to do it yourself.

You’re sprawled across the couch of a hotel room in Zaban city after finishing three jobs in a row. You’ve been trying to learn knitting, but found yourself better with embroidery– the precision of it, perhaps? Regardless, you’re tangled up in thread and strips of fabric that will someday turn into a pillow when Hisoka calls you.

You pick the phone on the fourth ring. To teach *him* patience.

“You’ll never guess who I just saw.”

Ugh. His gloating voice. Whatever he’s about to say is either going to be very very annoying or very very lewd. Either way, it’ll be at your expense.

“I’m sure I don’t want to know.”

“Oh don’t give me that, Illu. I promise you this information is of *top*- priority,” He affects a haughty tone that you believe is meant to be an uncharitable impression of your own; “After all, it’s… ‘ *family business* .’”

Your breath catches just slightly at that. You have a feeling you know exactly what he is insinuating– and you don’t like it one bit.

“...Hellooo? Still there, Illu?”

“Don’t call me that. And yes, I’m still here.”

“Oh don’t be like that, darling. I only wanted to let you know about a *very* interesting game I’ve stumbled into.”

You remain silent, choosing to focus instead on the embroidery in your lap.

“...Oh come on, not even going to ask? Don’t tell me you’re still mad about the whole bug thing.”

Silence.

He lets out an exaggerated sigh. “Well, fine, I don’t mind working for it.” He clears his throat dramatically; “You see, there I was, minding my own business in Greed Island, when I

suddenly found myself face-to-face with a few old *friends* .

You know exactly who he's talking about.

Nobody really gives you enough credit for your diligence as an older brother: *of course* the hypnotic needle you had long ago placed in Killua's head also doubled as spyware. It primarily functioned as a tracker, but was also capable of transmitting whatever conversations your brother was currently having – as long as one was in range. Essentially a live feed, no recording possible. Still– it was more than enough to stay up to date on your little brother's affairs.

So yes, you knew what Killua was up to. And there was absolutely nothing you could do about it. Your father had ordered he be monitored but 'left to his own devices.' No one in the family would dare defy direct orders from the Zoldyck patriarch-- except, perhaps, your grandfather. But he had always been soft on Killua, and wouldn't be inclined to pin his favorite grandson down; not to mention the fact that Zeno would probably eat his own arm before siding with your mother on anything.

Your mother hadn't asked you to put a pin in Kalluto yet– he was still a little too young, his neuroplasticity fragile. But maybe you should have taken the initiative anyway. Maybe if you'd planned things a little better instead of waiting around for someone else's orders, your family would still be together.

Speaking of planning….

"I highly doubt there was anything 'sudden' about it, Hisoka." Better to let the magician play his cards first before you reveal any of yours. "You were lying in wait, setting up an ambush."

" *Actually* , I'll have you know, that *I* was the one ambushed. While bathing, nonetheless! How embarrassing for me."

He's still trying to wind you up. He probably anticipated a certain reaction, and is pouting that he didn't get it. Determined to maintain your cool, you look down to examine your needlework, then frown at how sloppy your stitches have gotten.

"If only you were capable of such a thing."

"Eugh, shame is such a useless emotion. I can't be bothered with it," Hisoka says, unbothered as always. You're the one always being put under the microscope for what he considers an ' *excess of self-control* ;' why should he be spared from the same scrutiny? It's not as if *he's* ever shown an ounce of vulnerability. Maybe you'd be more willing to scream and get angry if he would do the same to you.

"So, anyway," Hisoka continues, "That's how I found myself face-to-face with some of my favorite playthings. Would you like to know what Gon Freecss and your precious Killua wanted from little old me?"

You stab the needle a little more forcefully into the fabric. "No."

“They wanted to play a game!”

The needle misses, instead going through the first layer of skin on your thumb. How annoying. Perhaps this is why people use thimbles.

“I thought you said you didn’t have time for sidequests.”

“Come now, doll, don’t pout. They needed an extra player for some dodgeball tournament they were doing, and how could I say no to those cute little faces.” His voice twists there, turning from teasing to exaggeratedly lascivious.

It makes your skin crawl. He knows that.

“You are a repulsive, despicable, atrocity of a man–” Each word comes out as a furious whisper.

“Oh, are we doing dirty talk today?” You hear shifting sounds coming from the receiver. “Hold on, let me find somewhere comfortable.”

A growl scrapes the back of your throat. “The world would be a better place without you.”

“Oh Illu, you really know how to get me going–.”

“--I *said* not to fucking call me that!!”

You almost crush your phone in surprise at your own voice. You hadn’t meant to yell.

You sound like your mother.

Hisoka emerges once more after an uncharacteristically awkward silence.

“...Want to share with the class?”

You freeze– a deer in headlights. You’d been ready to hear mockery: to have him exploit the weakness you’d just presented him on a silver platter. You’d been just as ready for him to ignore the whole thing and brush it off as a joke.

Hisoka’s current tone was neither soft nor gentle; it still carried that familiar playful lilt with an edge sharp enough to cut. But there was something buried in there that felt genuine.

Maybe that’s what made you break. The walls built to stand up to scrutiny buckled and shattered under the weight of genuine curiosity.

It wouldn’t hurt, you tell yourself, to give him a piece. As long as you keep the whole.

“That’s what my mother calls me,” is what you offer.

“Ah.”

Silence settles between you two once more, making itself comfortable in the spaces you’d left behind. It takes a moment to realize your hands have stopped moving. The needle is still

slotted in your thumb, slipped right into your skin.

“What does your father call you?”

There’s no judgement in his tone, no pity. Even the excitement of getting answers out of you seems to be missing. He wears neutrality like an old coat. Somehow, it still fits him.

“Just Illumi.”

“Always? Even when he's mad at you?”

“No.” The notion of your father expressing anger through some disparaging nickname is a ridiculous one.

Then you actually consider the question and come to a few uncomfortable revelations.

“When he’s mad he calls me my mother’s son.”

“Yikes," Hisoka’s laughter maintains that teetering balance between lighthearted and playful without sliding into mockery. You have to give the circus freak some credit: it’s a truly acrobatic feat. "Real happy home life you’ve got going on there.”

“We are a very strong, tight-knit family,” You say, firm and factual.

“Tight-knit, huh?” And there’s the implication.

So why does everyone keep leaving?

“Zoldycks do not give up on each other," Your mouth twists into something ugly, and you realize what you're about to say next might be cruel; "That is more than I can say for most families.”

“Touché,” Hisoka laughs in that ineffable way of his, the one that makes you wonder who it is he’s really laughing at.

“Besides,” You explain, as if to placate someone who isn’t there, “We all had a very privileged upbringing–”

He snorts “-Oh, of *that* we’re all certain-”

“-Nothing that would excuse any level of disloyalty. Our parents spared no expense in raising us; we had acres of land to explore as kids, endless amounts of luxury good, servants to wait on us hand and foot, Michelin star chefs to prepare our meals–”

“Did they poison them too? Or was that the job of the, ah, *Michelin star* poisoners?”

“You’re making fun of me.”

He hums, not agreeing or disagreeing. “Does that make you angry?”

You take a moment to pause and think on it.

“No.”

Something like wonder creeps into your voice; “I don’t care what you think of me.” Saying it out loud brings about an almost magical feeling of weightlessness.

Shame is a useless emotion.

“Bravo,” Hisoka croons mockingly, “You’ve overcome all odds and become the most heartless bitch there ever was.”

“Thank you,” you reply sincerely. Hisoka has a way of making everything else in the world seem small and dull and petty. Like none of it matters. Maybe not even him.

Some unknowable feeling is still churning in your stomach.

“When you get back from Greed Island,” you say slowly, intonation careful and specific, “I want to choke you while I ride you; I won't stop when you pass out. I want you to wake up with your cock still inside me, while I take my pleasure from your limp, useless body. Then you can hold me down and fuck me like I mean nothing to you.”

A stuttered groan from the other end of the receiver. “ *Fuck* , Illumi. I should call you names more often.”

You shift in your seat, moving aside spools of thread and spreading your legs for easier access.

“You could start right now.”

Chapter End Notes

hey i so did not mean to tap out when i did- i've been going through some major life changes including but not limited to dropping out of college and moving abroad (don't worry, we're doing much better) but it's been a whole thing. ao3 kind of left my radar for a hot minute as i got real caught up in Life. but oh, we are soooo back!

thing is, i've had (most) of these later chapters all but done for a while (i damn near wrote this fic backwards, crazy like that). thanks for sticking with me and we'll hopefully be back w/ regular posting schedule. (pretend it's still sunday).

i shall see all of you next week!

Chapter 14: acme of control

Chapter Summary

> ***"The Acme of Control"****: a card trick wherein the magician allows a spectator the illusion of control by having them pick their own cards & shuffle the deck themselves; after which the magician will produce their chosen cards from thin air.*

Chapter Notes

> RIP posting schedule (i got Covid for the first time ever and the past two weeks have been literal hell waugh)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You've been told by quite a few people that you lack a sense of humor. Your grandfather has always harped on about this particular detail. Milluki has made a mention of it, once or twice. But your largest detractor is currently lounging in front of you, gazing at the skyline, completely unperturbed by the world-altering events occurring around him.

And you can't help but find it a little funny.

"While you and Chrollo were off playing your little game of tag, the Hunter Association was staging an attack on the Chimera Ants of East Gorteau. Chairman Netero himself went to fight the King of the Ants, and lost his life to it. If you had timed your affairs better, you may have been able to fight them both."

"Hm, well I fear that would require a level of forethought I am simply not interested in. It's a shame about the Chairman, but it's not like I have much interest in… engaging with animals. Pass."

"These are not mere *animals* ; it was a completely new species, with likely origins in the Dark Continent, designated a threat level B by the Hunter Association–"

"Only *B?* Boring…"

"My father and grandfather were personally called in by the late Chairman, and even they spoke highly of the ants' potential–"

"Potential so great that they lost and vanished off the face of the planet? I think I'll still have to pass."

You take a deep breath through your nose. “You are impossible.”

“Thank you.”

You’ll have to pivot to a topic guaranteed to catch Hisoka’s attention: “Gon and Killua also joined the extermination team. Now Gon is on the verge of death, and Killua’s gone back home to ask for help from our father. At this rate they’ll both die.”

It’s as if a switch is flipped. His lazy posture straightens, hooded eyes that had fixated their stare on the skyline for your entire conversation snap into focus.

“ *What?* Explain yourself. ”

The proverbial ball back in your court, you steer the conversation towards where you’d wanted it to go this whole time. “There is a *thing* that has been contained in the basement of the Zoldyck Manor for a decade. A *thing* I once called family.”

You tell Hisoka what you have never told a living soul before. You told him about your great-grandfather, about his voyage to a continent beyond our realm of understanding, about what he inadvertently brought back. You told him about ‘Alluka,’ the butlers, the casualties. The shame.

“There’s no doubt about it– if a wish is made, I will be one of the first to die. And if it’s on the scale I believe it is… you will too.”

An uncomfortable silence. You don’t think you’ve ever seen Hisoka at a loss for words.

“... Well.” He finally groans. “That’s not good.”

You suppose there’s not much more to say.

“Indeed.”

And once you’ve finished recounting your family history– every sordid, messy detail– you go back to his room on the airship and he fucks you on the floor. It calms both of your nerves- the ones neither you nor Hisoka are willing to admit are on edge– to be anchored to your bodies this way.

He’s especially cruel that evening, crooning mockery and debasement in your ear. He has all sorts of petty nicknames to throw at you, and you hiss and spit vitriol right back. It would be utterly humiliating to admit how *hungrily* your body responds to the filth Hisoka murmurs into your ear– so you turn off all higher brain functions and let your mind go blank. No more Illumi or Hisoka: just two forces of nature joining together, an endless push and pull, give and take.

“It’s your turn,” you say after you’ve both collapsed back onto the sheets, sweat-soaked and sated.

“Excuse me?” Hisoka raises an eyebrow. “I think I gave as good as I got.”

“No, not that.” You furrow your brow, trying to find the words to express what you’re truly feeling. It’s hard. You have no idea how people do this all the time. “I laid bare my secrets, my family history and the baggage that comes along with it– so now it’s your turn. Quid pro quo.”

He barks out a laugh and you watch the way his Adam's apple bobs when he swallows. “I’ll have to pass.”

You roll over to your side, ready to protest, but he beats you to it.

“I’m afraid there’s not much of interest to share.”

“*I’m* interested,” you say, voice coming out surprisingly earnest.

He groans, running a hand through his hair. “That’s not how this *works* , Illumi. You don’t get to weasel me into a deal and then demand compensation for something I never signed up for. I don’t owe you a thing.”

You frown, feeling like this is just one more stipulation to add to the list of things that are offensive but no one will tell you why.

But you know *why,* a voice in your head whispers. *You know Hisoka has never been one to hold onto the past.*

After a moment of contemplation, you’re able to once more muster the ability to speak.

“You worked in a circus.”

He lets out an undignified snort. “Wow, put that one together all by yourself?”

“It was based in Glam Gas Land, but toured throughout Saherta. It was run by a man named Moritonio– until it wasn’t.”

He looks at you sharply. “You’ve been doing research on me, then?” His tone is mildly threatening– ineffective.

“He was a serial killer– and messy, but relatively prolific. The Zoldycks do pay close attention when killing sprees like this happen: it’s bad for business.”

You don’t mention your encounter outside the circus tent all those years ago. It was the same circus, under different management at the time; but that was all you knew. You hadn’t lied to Hisoka– up until now, you had never truly tried to dig.

“Oh?” The magician’s eyes narrow, “And is that all?”

“I’d wager you never knew your father– don’t look at me like that, it’s an educated guess. Maybe you had a mother, maybe not. The circus was the closest thing you had to a family. No one ever cared if you lived or died.”

It was mostly speculation. Nothing about Hisoka screamed ‘stable home life’ or ‘quaint childhood.’ You weren’t sure of anything beyond vague conjecture; but the best way to get information is to have the target give it away themself. Sometimes saying the *wrong* thing will yield more results than saying the right.

Hisoka turns his head away in contemplation. “Hm,” he mutters, “I’d give it a 7/10.”

You blink. “For accuracy or delivery?”

“Maybe a bit of both.”

Not an easy mark– but you already knew that. You remain undeterred. “Give me *something* to work with.”

“Not a chance,” he says, getting up from the bed and ambling over to the bathroom mirror, seemingly intent on fixing his hair. You sit up slightly, propping yourself on one elbow and holding his gaze through the mirror.

“You know that obscuring your past is only going to make me more determined to dig it up, right? I haven’t really pried yet– but I could.”

“Oho! Is that a threat?” The mockery in Hisoka’s voice is back, sharper now. “Be my guest, Illumi. I don’t remember half that shit anyway. Can’t wait to be educated on my own life.”

You draw your brows together, staring at him as intently as you can. “That was meant to be a factual statement– not a threat. If I was threatening you, I’d have drawn blood by now.”

He laughs, for real this time– you think. “Oh doll… you’re lucky I like you.”

You blink owlishly back at him. *Play dumb. He likes that.*

“Ok,” Hisoka sighs, spinning around to face you. “Here’s something: I don’t actually know how to swim. I used to avoid boats like the plague because I thought I’d drown– a ridiculously boring death.”

“Oh. You seemed to fare well enough on Zevil Island.”

“It doesn’t really bother me anymore.” Hisoka wears a pensive expression now, like it’s taking a concerted effort to dig these things up. “I can tread water well enough now, and nen makes staying afloat easy– I can just transmute the surface of the water if worst comes to worst. But it was embarrassing when I was younger– back when I was still capable of such a thing." He mimes dusting off his hands, as if ridding himself of the memories. “There, is that enough for you?”

You take a moment to chew on this new nugget of information. Turn it over and over in your mind like a smooth, shiny stone. It wasn’t especially vulnerable or profound. It didn’t really

explain anything about what he was. But as you smooth that thought over in your mind, you find yourself wondering– when was the last time Hisoka had shared this trivial little fact? Had he ever had reason to? Could it be possible that you are the only living soul on this earth that knows the man who rejects the concept of shame used to be embarrassed over his inability to swim?

“Yes.” You reply with perfect certainty. “It is.”

You set out the next day to track down the rogue members of your family. There’s no time to waste- which means it's the perfect time to put that new sports car you just bought to use.

“It is a *miracle* you still have a license,” Hisoka huffs from the passenger seat, gripping tightly onto the handle above the window.

You frown. “What’s wrong with my driving?”

“What’s wrong with your–” Hisoka rolls his eyes in that exaggerated way of his– half exasperation, half fondness. “You are an absolute hazard to society, you know that?”

“Well,” you say, shifting gears and watching the gauge go up kilometer by kilometer. “It’s kind of my job.”

You get a ping on your phone. Swiping through, you see that Milluki has sent you the location of Killua’s vehicle.

When all other family negotiations fail, one can always count on Milluki's weakness for bribes.

“Watch the ro– are you *seriously* checking your phone right now?!”

“Yes.” You’re a bit distracted by the incoming truck hurtling towards you. It has just occurred to you that you may be in the wrong lane.

Well, you wouldn’t be a Zoldyck if you didn’t know how to make the most of an opportunity. You roll down the window, leaning out with needles in your hand and calculating your aim. There were two people in the truck; you could probably get them both if you were smart about it.

“The *wheel* , Illumi, the wheel– oh *shit*–” You turn back to find Hisoka reaching over trying to grab said wheel from the passenger seat. Oh, you hadn’t realized you let go.

“Thanks,” you reply, still busy waiting for the moment the truck passes right by you. You’ll have a fraction of a second to bury your needles in their skull: more than enough time.

The driver’s face passes by in a blur as they swerve to avoid hitting you head on. Your needles hit their target, and it’s almost comical how quickly their panicked expressions melt into lifelessness.

“I am *never* getting in a car with you again.”

You almost scoff. A car crash would be a very boring, mundane way to die– Hisoka may get on your nerves, but even he wouldn't deserve such a fate. If you were to kill him now, you'd make him bleed– starting with his throat, a cut deep enough to be fatal (at least for a normal human being), but still leaving his vocal chords intact so that he could gurgle out his last words. You'd like to know what they'd be.

"If you're going to kill me, I'd much rather you just go for the jugular."

Sometimes you wonder if the magician really *can* read minds.

You feel like your blood is still humming with adrenaline when you confront Killua in the forest. You can sense Hisoka somewhere nearby– he's not even making an effort to hide his bloodlust– and you know the rest of your family are bearing witness to the events through Tsubone. It's the perfect stage.

Perhaps you've had a bit too much exposure to Hisoka's theatrics.

You know there are rules Killua is keeping from you– it was only a suspicion at first, but seeing your brother has to face has made you certain: he's hiding something from you. You know the look he gets when he's trying to withhold information from you– a little furrow in his brow, the clench of his jaw, the sheen of sweat on his skin. The fear radiating from his body in waves of uncontrolled nen. It's all so very *Killua.*

You invite him to kill you. There is a moment– barely a second, really– where you think he might actually do it. You entertain the idea of your death in a way you haven't in a while; would your father be disappointed? Would your brothers mourn? Would your mother break?

Would Hisoka–

The moment passes. Tears are streaming down Killua's cheeks as he makes a wish and sends you home.

Half a day later, you stand atop one of the buildings opposite the hospital and feel the telltale nen-flare of a wish being granted.

You've lost. Utterly and completely. Your father has more or less given Killua his blessing– endorsement which you can tacitly ignore but do not yet have the power to defy directly. Even your mother seems in awe of *Its* wish-granting abilities– totally forgetting the fact that said abilities belong to the *thing* possessing her child, that oh-so-terrible *thing* that she should surely hate on principle.

And Killua has defied you, cast you out with a word and a wish, and there is no power you know of that can bring him to heel.

No power, except ‘Alluka’ itself.

A smile cuts into your cheeks as you succumb to the mania bubbling inside you. Such power you could wield– if only you could keep under your control. Killua could finally be tied down to the estate, be made to forget his childish fancies and the ticking time-bomb he calls a friend. Father could rest easy knowing his chosen heir was back in his rightful place, and perhaps Grandfather would even properly retire. Mother would… well, you’d hope the return of her favorite child would calm her mind. And if it didn’t– well, you had the power to change that too.

Everything. In the palm of your hand.

You laugh and laugh and laugh as the fantasy plays before you, and some part of you is trying to remind you it’s not real, but that part is quieter than usual so you easily dismiss it and revel in the unreality. *Pull yourself together,* are its last little words, but you don't want to. *It’s so much easier, so much more fun to let it fall apart.*

But you can’t say anything; all that comes out is laughter.

That is the state in which Hisoka finds you.

He takes you back to his hotel without a word. The energy coursing through your bones has morphed into something darker, angrier. You’re probably spilling lethal *ren* all over the place, but Hisoka doesn’t make mention of it. He just lets you into his room with a swipe of a keycard and allows you to pin him against the wall the minute the door shuts behind you.

The balance of power in your relationship with the magician has always been rocky. Sometimes it seems like Hisoka holds all the– proverbial and *literal*– cards. Sometimes he seems so easy to bend around your finger.

You’re used to power structures working like this: the one who hurts has the power. The one who gets hurt, doesn’t. It is why you have always lost to your father. It is why Killua will always lose to you. Now this gentle, simple order has been upset by the sibling that was never meant to be, and now– now you’ve defied your father, and Killua has defied you. Everything is backwards. You think– no, you *know* – that if you possessed Alluka you could realign the scales. Everything will go back to being as it was. Everything will go back to being as it should.

But you lost. And the scales are twisting, upside-down, not making sense.

You don’t even know where you and Hisoka stand. You were both ready to betray each other, each aware of that fact. And yet– and yet. You have never let someone see this much of you or your family. You don’t know how to categorize him anymore, you don’t know what box to place him in, you don’t know how you can use him when he’s not cooperating–

“You’re thinking too hard, doll,” Hisoka breathes against your ear. He has his hand down your pants, pinning you to the wall as you scratch and claw at his bare back. He ruts against you, you feel your breath hitch, you feel your stomach tighten and your head empty itself of thoughts. Then, just before you can let go, he takes away his hand.

You let fury overtake you.

“Hisoka,” you growl, and you don’t even recognize your own voice. You dig your nails deeper into his back, you know you’ve drawn blood. You shove him onto the divan– courtesy of this lovely airship hotel– just to climb on top of him. He looks lascivious as ever, spreading his legs invitingly.

“C’mon, Illumi,” he laughs, “Hurt me. I can take it.”

You comply. You don’t know who’s in charge any more.

Chapter End Notes

i'm back againnnn sorry it's just hiatus after hiatus with the holiday season. i got sick over new years (boo!) and despite being up-to-date with my shots and boosters and whatnot, i was just not prepared for the covid experience it seems. but here we are it's the final stretch i promise, all but one of the follow chapters have been written and edited, so this show should be getting back on the road.

few notes:
1. i think it's not too much of a stretch to assume Illumi knows about the DC... considering the stuff w/ Zigg Zoldyck (who I referenced here as his great-grandfather, but we technically don't know how many greats he is (some people think Maha is Zeno's dad, and Zigg is Maha' dad? but some also have theorized that Maha = Zigg so honestly who knows at this point.) and considering Illumi tends to be in-the-know about most things in the family (in a way that Killua, for example, was not yet exposed to) I think it's safe to say he has some baseline information. It's also easier this way... for exposition....

2. Alluka and Killua did not have much of a presence in this chapter, alas- originally I was going to have them play a bigger part, but this is Illumi's story from Illumi's POV and I think so much of what goes on in this arc is just him projecting shit like crazy onto other people (favorite hobby) and I believe a lot of his desire to control everyone he loves is, well- a HIM problem. also, i just... could not bring myself to misgender Alluka that much oof. I know canonically Illumi (well, literally everyone but Killua) would just be using he/him but i couldn't do that i just couldn't. So pretend Illumi's slipping up in his own head idk. (transphobia? my guy LOOK at yourself. the projection is projecting

again.) I compromised with having Illumi use "it" and "thing" which , while being super dehumanizing (just the way he likes it) is at least somewhat gender neutral... which is kinda(?) the case with Nanika (going off the translation of her name just being "Something" it felt more or less appropriate idk). but i deffo want to write some more Zoldyck sibling stuff in the future that will focus on the younger siblings- I especially love speculating on the relationship between Kalluto and Alluka, might do something to play off that one day, we'll see. but i have to finish this and my other hxh fic first before i start anything new....

guys we're getting there! slowly but surely. getting there. and then finally i can lay these two clowns to rest and write about something else for a change oops my hand slipped is that a black whale fic no no no no don't do this to yourself wait-

Chapter 15: nosebleed stakes

Chapter Summary

> ***"Nosebleed Stakes"*** *are the highest stakes offered in a poker game-- insinuating that, with so much money on the table, either a win or loss could result in a bloody nose.*

Chapter Notes

> thank you to everyone who has left me a comment, new readers and old! they make me blush and squeal and jump on my bed and twirl my hair around my finger every time 🥺🥺 i haven't gotten a chance to go through and respond to each individually but know that this one goes out to y'all fr
>
> and now for the showdown you've all been waiting for....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’re gonna lose.”

Three words- not meant as condemnation, but something angrier, more vulnerable- hang heavy in the air.

“I could always count on you for a vote of confidence, Illumi,” Hisoka dryly counters. “Have some faith,” he adds after a pause. “I never lose.”

“That’s exactly what–” Hisoka’s looking at you all bemused, the point going over *his* head for once. You bite back what you were about to say.

That’s exactly what scares me.

Because men like Hisoka, who have spent so long winning that they don’t know how to lose anymore– men like that don’t always know how to pick themselves back up after they fall.

You don't make the mistake of spectating from the stands- you're well aware of how much those two enjoy audience participation. Instead, you watch it all unfold from the safe,

comfortable perch of Hisoka's own Heaven's Arena suite. You turn the TV on and off to watch the fight in random intervals; grasping for some semblance of control.

When it's over, you turn the TV off. You sit in silence, staring at your own reflection on the black screen.

It wasn't a fair fight- but Hisoka never cared about “fair,” so long as it was fun. That's why he gave Chrollo all the time he needed to prepare, let him freely choose his own stage and fight under whatever conditions he found most favorable.

But Chrollo isn't like you . You had tried, but were unable to impress upon Hisoka even this one simple fact.

Chrollo Lucilfer wasn't doing this for the thrill of it. He doesn’t engage in combat for something as simple as a rush of adrenaline or arousal– rather, he sees it as a puzzle to solve; a way to put his intellect to good use. The Spider had not come to fight; he came to win.

And win he did.

You sit for another minute, and then two.

When you finally pick yourself up again, your feet naturally carry you out of the apartment and down to the arena. Someone has to pick up the body.

You've fought both alongside and against Hisoka enough times to be fairly confident in your assessment of his abilities. He works best in spontaneous conditions, wherein he can showcase the greatest weapon in his arsenal: adaptability. No one can deny that Hisoka is a genius when it comes to improvising a plan or manipulating an unfavorable situation into an advantageous one. That’s his game. But Hisoka is at his most vulnerable when he forgets that not everyone is like him; not everyone is interested in playing.

For all the time Hisoka gave Chrollo to prepare, never had it occurred to him to do the same.

Hisoka may have to die twice today.

He's hanging on to life by the scraps. Wounded would be too kind a word-- he wasn't just bleeding, he was *shedding skin* . Hisoka is currently held together by nothing more than bungee gum and sheer willpower. It's obvious he's in no state to be up and walking, but the magician had never abided by the laws of common sense. You stand very still as Hisoka saunters over to you, arrogant as ever, a swagger in his step to mask the obvious limp.

Where did those limbs even come from-

Waves of rage, frustration, and confusion tint the bloodlust that rolls off your skin. It takes most of your willpower to dampen the effects of your nen, lest this patchwork-Hisoka keel

over at the merest push of aura.

When he tells you his plan for the Spiders, you briefly consider the merits of euthanasia.

"Hisoka, you can't be serious. You just *died* . What sort of idiot tries to pick a fight with the man who just got finished blowing him to pieces?!"

"Oh no, not a fight," Hisoka says through bloody teeth. "I'm just going to kill him."

He spreads what remains of his lips apart in some gruesome imitation of a smile. "I'm going to kill them all." "

You feel your pulse jumping in frustration. "Once again, your ego talking-"

"- No games," He all but ignores you, steamrolling ahead. "No tricks. I'm not doing this for the fun of it. I'm doing it because I want *each and every Spider wiped off the face of the Earth* ."

You inhale. Exhale. Inhale again. It's more serious than you thought.

Men like Hisoka don't know how to lose. And they certainly don't know when to give up.

"Coming face-to-face with your own mortality is not an invitation to go gallivanting off in some pitiful attempt to prove the world wrong."

"I'm suffering under no delusions of immortality, Illumi. This isn't about ego."

"It's *precisely* about ego! Get a *grip*, Hisoka– not one person is asking this of you. If all you need is help humbling yourself, I'll gladly offer my services."

You let a bit of your bloodlust slip out to show him you're serious. It promptly backfires.

"Oh, spare me the theatrics. The Scary-Big-Brother act isn't going to work with me– I'm not Killua."

Your next breath is sharp and ragged. Like getting the wind knocked out of you.

Inhale. Exhale. Now is not the time to lose your temper.

"Do not speak of things you know nothing about."

"Don't I, Illumi? Come now… you and I both know I've witnessed more than my fair share of your little family affairs. I've probably spent more time with your brother in the past year than you– so I think I'm qualified to say a thing or two on the subject."

"Shut up." You want to attack him, hurt him, kill him. You can't move.

Inhale.

"Well, darling, someone needed to say it– you were clearly never going to figure it out on your own. It's plain as day to everyone but you."

“It’s not any of your business what-”

“Your brother *hates* you, Illumi. And he’s never gonna accept this warped projection of love you’re trying to force upon him. So why don’t you do us all a kindness and stop trying already .”

Exhale . “You have no idea–”

“--You smother people, Illumi. You smother them until they can’t breathe and call it love. And worst of all is you don’t even know you’re doing it; there’s not an ounce of self-awareness in that empty little head.”

Hisoka's breathing has also taken on a heavy edge. *Inhale. Exhale.*

“And what would *you* know of love, *Hisoka?”* You finally spit out. The bloodlust is back in full force, almost completely flooding your vision. “You’ve never loved anything in your entire life-– you wouldn’t even know how to start.” You take a menacing step closer. “Do you have any idea why that is?”

His mouth twists as if he’s tasted something sour. “I have a pretty good idea of what you’re about to say, so–”

“It’s because no one has ever loved you.”

“Well, bravo. Do you want a medal for stating the obvious?”

Inhale. Inhale. Inhale. Inhale. In-

“You’ve never even allowed yourself to imagine caring for anything or anyone. Because if you do, you’ll wind up confronted by the fact that they *don't feel the same.”*

“Some of us,” Hisoka snarls, “Don’t rely on some fanciful notion like *love* as a crutch. I can move just fine without it.” If you had the presence of mind to move, you would gleefully put that theory to the test by kicking out whatever he's using as a prosthetic leg.

Instead, you force out a laugh. “You say that as if it’s by choice," *Exhale. Exhale.* “And you think I’m the one in denial?! Hisoka, you- you are unlovable.”

A sneer tears its way across Hisoka’s face. It opens up the gap in his cheek where the flesh was blown away.

“Is that supposed to wound me?” Each breath has a sort of whistling sound as the air tries to claw its way through his teeth. “I’ve never tried to be loved a day in my life.”

The whistling gets louder. *Inhale. Inhale.*

“You, on the other hand, will spend your entire life *trying* and still fall short.”

Inhale – no, slower this time. *Exhale* .

“Hisoka, you don’t know the first thing about how my family loves. We can despise each other, may even want to kill each other- but we will never be alone.” *Not even if we wanted to be.* If there’s ever a time to channel your mother, it would be now. You draw yourself up to your full height (still an inch too short) and lace each word with poison. “You, on the other hand, will die alone and uncared for and call it freedom.”

“Such spite, little doll,” Hisoka spits, and strides towards you, “But you’re wrong.”

He’s so close you can feel each whistling breath on your face. *Exhale.*

You brace for an attack that never comes.

Inhale - this time in surprise.

By the look on his face, you think Hisoka has just reached the same conclusion: throughout this entire altercation, neither of you has instigated violence. The language you’re both so familiar with, so reliant upon, has abandoned you both in the stifling heat of this moment. You don’t have a scratch on you, not even a drop of blood; meanwhile he still bears the wounds of another man. .

“What I would call freedom,” Hisoka rasps, breath still whistling through his tattered skin and broken teeth, “Is to be granted a death without your shadow looming over me.”

Exhale.

A heavy blanket of silence drapes itself over you. There is nothing more to say.

You never should have allowed things to go this far. You never should have pretended to care. It was a bad act you two had put on. Nothing more than a bad act.

You turn and walk away. Chrollo will eventually finish the job. There is nothing for you here.

The magician starts laughing behind you, unhinged, almost maniacal. You know this trick.

You don’t look back.

Chapter End Notes

things were getting a bit too chummy around here, huh

i have seen, read, and written myself many a hisoillu confrontation, and it pretty much inevitably gets violent because that is their comfort zone. but when i was writing this particular scene, i thought to myself "what if you took away that violence-as-a-crutch, what remains" and the result is one deeply uncomfortable interaction. hisoka isn't in a

state where he can go toe to toe with illumi even a little, and illumi knows this. and they are so much more focused on lashing out and hurting each other verbally that it gets to the point where they both realize-- wait, no blows were exchanged? hey wow this actually makes me feel so much worse-- and by that point it's already too late. they've both said things they can't take back, and can't shrug off as easily as they would a physical injury. that's what happens when you don't cultivate a healthy outlet for your emotions, kids!

(then off hisoka goes off to butcher a powerless shalnark and kortopi because he hasn't learned his lesson)

Chapter 16: the bottle imp paradox

Chapter Summary

"The Bottle Imp Paradox" *refers to the 1891 short story "The Bottle Imp" by Robert Louis Stevenson. It follows a man who acquires a cursed bottle with a wish-granting imp inside. However, if the holder dies with the bottle in their possession, their soul is forfeit to Hell. The only way to escape this fate is to pawn the bottle off to someone else— but no rational person would willingly sacrifice themself by taking on such a burden… would they?*

Chapter Notes

I would recommend reading the original short story of "The Bottle Imp" (or at least a summary) for further context- it's one of those that makes me absolutely unhinged.

regarding the paradox itself- there are generally three agreed upon 'solutions' as to what (or who) would be needed to resolve it:

Someone gullible enough to be tricked into purchasing the bottle and taking on the curse.

Someone who takes on the curse willingly out of love for the bottle's current owner.

Someone who agrees to take on the curse simply because they believe they are going to Hell either way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Had he been in a better mood, Hisoka may have put more effort into the tableau he was arranging out of Shalnark and Kortopi's bodies– what remained of them, anyway. A bit more dismemberment here and there might have really elevated the scene, perhaps a limb or two hanging from the adjacent swing, or maybe removing Shal's head altogether placing it next to Kortopi's… but, in the state he was in, Hisoka just couldn't muster his usual glee for artistic pursuits. If he couldn't enjoy it, he didn't much see the point.

Chrollo would get the message either way.

This wasn't about enjoyment anyways. Hisoka couldn't fall back on hedonistic hunger anymore, not when death's cold grip remained firm on his heart. He had been gone for a

moment there– really, fully gone– and the emptiness still clung to him. He would have much preferred the confirmation of his hard-earned seat in Hell to *nothing*.

If there was no hell to send the Spider to, Hisoka was determined to make one.

The crows were starting to descend on the corpses, and Hisoka left them to their work. With any luck they would pick an eyeball or two out of its socket, and Hisoka could taunt Kurapika with the promise of karmic retribution.

Not that he'd seen much of the chain user since their encounter in Yorknew. Whatever he was up to, Hisoka could only hope it wouldn't interfere with his own vendetta. He'd gotten the impression that Kurapika had abandoned revenge in pursuit of his clan's eyes, but the kid was volatile. Far as he knows, the oh-so feared chain user is just biding his time.

Hisoka briefly considers extending another invitation of partnership– or, if Kurapika proved difficult, a mercy kill– but decides against it. He doesn't need an alliance slowing him down, much less a partner. His mind wanders back to Illumi.

Waves of rage and disgust crash through him at the mere thought of the assassin. There was nothing he hated more than being tied down, and Illumi's vice grip was nothing if not constraining. Hisoka had put up with him for far too long, and for what– the perfect opportunity to kill each other, squandered. If he'd been in better shape and saner mind, Hisoka might have at least come away from their confrontation with a fresh kill. All he has now is a hollowness in his chest and bitter taste in his mouth.

It was ridiculous to place any weight on Illumi's words– Hisoka would like to think he knows this better than anyone. He'd like to think he knows *Illumi* better than anyone. He's a shell of a person in the shape of a perfect Zoldyck son, with the emotional insight of a rock. It shouldn't bother Hisoka one bit what Illumi thinks of him. He'd said nothing that Hisoka hadn't already heard a thousand times before.

It wasn't the insults themselves that pierced him. It was the way Hisoka had felt his own anger surge and bubble up beyond his control. To think he was still capable of such an emotion from as petty a source as Illumi Zoldyck… it unnerved him. Hisoka tried to explain it away as misplaced anger at Chrollo– those wounds were, after all, quite fresh– but couldn't quite shake the feeling that this was something *different* . An anger that burned hot rather than cold.

The vulnerability of it all made him sick.

Dying had been empty, hollow, weightless. The loss of Illumi was heavy as a sinking stone.

Hisoka pondered, not for the first time, what they were supposed to mean to each other. How he truly felt.

'Love' was a thin word. Hisoka didn't typically use it- not out of shame or fear at having it be spoken, but because it simply didn't carry any weight. *Love* was loose on Hisoka's tongue; he *loved* the adrenaline rush of a good fight, he *loved* bubblegum, he *loved* dying his hair, he *loved* the expression of an opponent when they realized they were about to die. It would be

easy to tell Illumi he loved him. Might be fun, even. But it wouldn't mean anything. Love or no love, the words would rise from his mouth and wisp through his teeth with a reedy sound, before dissipating prettily. There would be little point; even the best of charades grow boring once the magician shows you his trick.

Hisoka was sure Illumi would feel the complete opposite; they couldn't be more different. (They couldn't be more alike).

They couldn't *be* without the other. In the way that a shadow can only exist by virtue of a stagelight, and said light will shine brightest in the dark. Being with an Illumi was endlessly aggravating, an exhausting push and pull with claws and teeth and tongue.

But it was also an affirmation: I exist I *exist I exist*.

And if Hisoka could be sure of one thing, it was this: he hadn't clawed his way from the brink of death just to fade away once more.

Chapter End Notes

(i know it's late.... but to make up for that we're doing a double batch of chapter this week! woah)

surprise Hisoka POV!!!! unreliable narrator Illumi takes a break, and we shed some light on what's going on with our other, almost-as-unreliable protagonist. this is still very much Illumi's story, but I needed Hisoka to be able to get a word in there too- without an unhinged Illumi filter to process (and subsequently mangle) its meaning.

Hisoka is a weird character that often works better as a sidepiece or, at the very least, deuteragonist, because so much of what makes him great is the mystery. being in his head too long risks throwing both his character and the audience off-kilter, so it was a really delicate balance to measure while i was wrote. he's a bit muted here, but intentionally so-- i think Hisoka is still very much reeling from his own death and the huge character shift going forward(to be expanded upon in the next chapter), so we're dealing with a man who's both familiar and changéd. not to mention unhinged in his own (distinct!) way! i wanted to show some contrast in the narrative voice; while shifting perspectives from 2nd to 3rd did help distinguish Hisoka from Illumi, this may still be a chapter i come back to with some revisions later. we'll see. also we're sticking as close to canon as possible so RIP shalnark and kortopi.

there's so much more i want to say but i also want to get the next chap up ASAP so in the meantime please know i have greatly greatly GREATLY enjoyed reading each and every one of y'all's(is that a word? why doesn't english have a vous/vocês/vosotros type plural subject?) comments, and i do plan on responding eventually. thanks and much love to all you wonderful people who have been so patient and kind <33

Chapter 17: queen's gambit

Chapter Summary

> ***"The Queen's Gambit"*** *is an opening move in chess, in which a player sacrifices a pawn to gain control of the board. In placing themself at a tactical disadvantage, the player will open up new opportunities to win the game.*

Chapter Notes

> hello again! we've finally come to the end... or as some may see it, the beginning...
>
> P.S. if you can remember the card hisoka chose way back in their first encounter (after all this time!) you get a flower 🌼🌸🌺
> remember that card... hold that image in your head... till next week ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hisoka disappears for a long time before coming back with a ring.

He had turned up miraculously the minute you'd wrapped up a job- as is his way- before dragging you into a crooked alleyway; one of many veining through Yorknew city. You can't say what possessed you to let him.

He hasn't relinquished his hold on your arm, so you do it for him with a firm yank and a step back. As far back as you *can* go; alleyways don't tend to be built for personal space. There is nothing else here; shrouded by rain and darkness and high brick walls, you may be the only two people in the world.

“What do you want?”

Your voice is level, collected, completely put together. He shatters the wall in an instant.

“Marry me.”

Control over your basic motor functions fails you; your jaw drops and your eyes bulge out in what you're sure is a very unflattering expression.

Those two words rattle around in your little brain.

“Oh, don’t look so scandalized!” He’s laughing at you, acting as if nothing was wrong. As if nothing had ever happened between the two of you that might warrant some bad blood. As if

he'd already forgotten.

Hisoka isn't interested in the past. You grind your teeth, furious. It takes every ounce of self-control you have to keep your composure.

"I don't know what delusion you're suffering from that's given you the excuse to ever show your face around here again, but I can assure you– whatever game you're playing won't work. Our *association* has reached it's natural conclusion; we have no further business. I don't ever want to see or hear from you again."

"So cold! At least hear me out. Don't we owe each other that much?"

He doesn't even pretend to sound uncertain. Even a mimicry of guilt would be better than *this.*

"I owe you nothing. Don't try to contact me again."

"C'mon, you'll like this one; I'm proposing an engagement... of sorts."

"No."

"It would be for a *special* kind of service."

If he's insinuating what you think he's insinuating, Hisoka is soon to be a twice-dead man.

"This is the very last time I will say this," you start very slowly, trying to prevent your voice from shaking in fury, "Because should we meet again, I will kill you on sight. *I* am *not* a *whore*."

He throws back his head and laughs again, a full-belly laugh that doesn't even manage to sound sinister.

"Oh doll," He said, flicking a strand of your hair. "I do love to see where your mind goes; especially when it's completely off-base. I'm not asking to buy your *body*; as I'm asking you to do what you do best– and offering a hefty reward in return! And it's a hit I'm sure you'll be... amenable to."

You scoff. "You think I need to get married to pull off an assassination?" Despite your best efforts, a tinge of curiosity sneaks into your voice. It's been a while since you've done a deep cover mission.

"Not exactly, darling. I just want you to sign a prenup of sorts, so that I can guarantee all my assets will go to you. In the case you finish your job, that is–"

"In case?" You interrupt, affronted. "Do you think me so incapable?"

"I think this one may be a challenge even for you--"

"--Doubtful--"

“Since I’m contracting you to kill *me.* ”

Silence falls back over your alleyway. At some point your amygdala must kick in, and you hurtle you into fight-or-flight mode; obviously favoring the former.

His influence, whispers a tiny voice in your head. You squash it down violently.

You pounce, claws out.This time you will leave a mark. This time you will tear him open and cover him with scratches and carve your name on his fucking chest if that’s what it takes for him to *remember* –

He counters your first blow, then your second, but it's clear he’s still a bit slow on his feet. Perhaps coming back from the dead wasn't as easy as he made it seem. Even so, it’s almost suspiciously easy to gain the advantage; one pin in his shoulder disables the nerves of his right arm, paralyzing the flesh until it meets bubblegum. Another fraction of a second, and you have him on his back.

Frustratingly, Hisoka doesn't try to fight back anymore. He lays on his back, blinking up at you, biding time as he waits out the storm.

"What do you want from me."

For once, the magician is quiet.

His arm should be paralyzed for at least thirty more seconds, so you cement your advantage by throwing one leg over him and pinning Hisoka down with a straddle. He’s got a scratch above his eyebrow and a wound on his shoulder. *You* did that.

For a moment there is only ragged breathing. *Inhale. Exhale. Exhale. Exhale.*

Detach. *Detach...*

“No more games, just- just tell me what you want."

“Everything, probably.” Hisoka says with a crooked little smile, like it’s the funniest joke ever.

“No!" You rattle out, and it almost sounds like laughter. "No, you do not get to come back here after– you do not get to come back. I’m quite sure I made that clear the last time.”

He’s examining you carefully now. “Yes, I was thinking about that *last time* of ours. All the generous words we said to each other… well, I suppose it made me realize that you might know me better than I give you credit for."

His yellow eyes glitter with malice. "Just as I know you.”

“You don’t. You don’t understand a thing– you never would have said those things to me otherwise.”

“Oh Illumi,” Hisoka shifts under you so that he’s looking directly into your eyes; “It is precisely *because* I know you that I said those things. You and I have been gathering ammunition on each other for years– don’t deny it–”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Good, because it’s true. But I’ve come to understand that the people best equipped to hurt you are the ones who know you best. It’s been a long time since anyone has been able to get under my skin with just words, you know that? You sure know how to pick ‘em.”

You’re not sure what you’re supposed to say.

Thank you? You're welcome? I’m sorry? Fuck off?

"But what I realized later is that it wasn’t *what* you said that got to me– if it’d come from, I dunno, Phinks? I would’ve found the whole bit hilarious. No, it's not just the things you said- it was the fact that it was *you* who said them.”

You conjure the fuzzy image of a Phantom Troupe member shouting your flaws at you. Loathe as you are to admit it, Hisoka's got a point: you can’t imagine a world in which that would be very effective.

Hisoka's voice pitches down, softer and quieter, like the words are meant for you and only you. “It’s far less easy to dismiss someone you’ve already allowed inside.”

You consider his words, turning them over and over in your head. To acknowledge the truth in Hisoka's words is to admit you'd let him hurt you. To admit you'd let him *in* .

He seems to sense you still need a push, and so concedes more of his own ground. “You’re probably right about me, you know. And… as much as it pains me to admit, you were probably right about Chrollo, too. I… have been made aware of my limits.”

A dangerous understatement. You open your mouth to twist the knife a bit deeper, but Hisoka cuts you off before you can even begin.

“- *But* that doesn’t mean I can’t exceed them.” He narrows his eyes pointedly, “And I don’t need you getting in my way.”

“I don’t see how me killing you is ‘not getting in your way…’” Your snarky tone dissipates as a thought occurs to you. While Hisoka has always been one for eccentrics, this game of his just doesn’t make sense. If his true goal is Chrollo…

Your eyes widen, taking more of him in. “What is it you’re *really* planning, Hisoka?”

He grins. “Now you’re asking the right questions.”

Hisoka tells you his plan- his reckless, stupid, *impossible* plan- to take down the Spiders, and it takes all you can not to wring his foolish neck. He’s risking death to get revenge for dying– it demonstrates a lack of self-preservation so typical of the Hisoka you’ve grown to know that you almost don’t stop to question it. But then he says something unexpected.

“I know you think I’m being reckless, and that I haven’t thought this through. But I meant what I said earlier– I’m no longer interested in playing their game. I *am* going to win, Illumi; and I’m sure with your help that I can. But I need you to trust me– as much as someone like you can trust anyone.”

“I have plenty of faith in your strength, but… it’s as you yourself acknowledged: we all have limits. When it comes to outsmarting Chrollo–”

“Listen,” Hisoka cuts you off, clearly getting impatient, “Chrollo may not appear it, but he’s just as arrogant as me– the bastard’s just a little better at hiding it. If I can get him into a situation where he feels he is assured victory, there will be an opening. Chrollo is… well, he’s a fatalist at heart. He’s brilliant, but can’t think outside of the box he himself created, always too quick to accept what he presumes is destined. *That* I can exploit.”

“...Ok, suppose I buy that. You’d still have the issue of maneuvering him into such a situation–”

“-- So here is where you come in.”

You mull over his words, already running through potential scenarios in your mind. Getting ahead of yourself.

Narrowing your eyes, you search for holes in his narrative. “I don’t see what any of this has to do with me.”

Hisoka meets your gaze evenly. “Because you are, in some ways, like Chrollo: too quick to give up.”

He raises his hands in defense at your expression, “I’m not saying you lack dedication. You’re a *professional,* I know. But whether you can admit it or not, you’ve also put yourself in a box you can’t think out of, and it's made you overcautious. A good quality for an assassin, for sure... but sometimes avoiding risk can be just as dangerous as craving it.”

He cups your chin, and you let his hands stay on you for just a moment before turning your face away.

“That’s why we’re so good together, you see. It’s about balance. You temper me, while I challenge you.”

“How philosophical,” you snap back at him, feeling oddly patronized. How ridiculous for *Hisoka* of all people to give you a lecture on strategy. “Apparently it took nothing short of *death* to ‘temper’ your spirit– or so you say. I, for one, am failing to see this enlightenment manifested. You say you changed, and yet it sounds to me like you are still the same man who would throw his life away for the thrill of it.”

There’s a bright, wild, utterly unreadable look in his eyes. “That’s where I need you to trust me, Illumi. Because I can promise you this much– *I want to live* .”

Without thinking, you curl your fingers over the heartbeat in his chest. Even over his sternum you can feel it– the pulse of life.

“I don't believe you,” you say, voice coming out far quieter than intended. It seems so obvious, for another human being to want to live. The first law of nature is self-preservation. You’ve watched many, many people beg for their lives in front of you– even those who knew nothing but suffering and pain. Sometimes especially those. It isn’t rational to want to hold on to such a miserable existence, but survival was all about instinct. It’s very difficult for even the most skilled of combatants to overcome that instinct and supercede their limits. Hisoka was both a hedonist and a survivor. Even when he was risking his life, Hisoka never struck you as someone who *wanted* to die.

So why is it so hard to believe him now?

Hisoka must sense some of your inner turmoil. He puts his hands over yours, holding firm even when you try to pull them away.

“Illumi. I want to live.”

You don’t believe him. You *can’t* believe him, because you’ve always known that whatever relationship you have with Hisoka is going to end in bloodshed for one or both of you. Thus, there was no point in getting too attached, because one way or another he would never stay.

He’s not promising to stay. You remind yourself. *He’s only promising to live.*

“I want to live too.” Your mouth forms the words without being prompted. And it’s true: you do want to live, you have always wanted to live. You were never going to throw it all away in a blaze of glory.

Hisoka bared his teeth in a triumphant, animalistic smile. “Then we’re in agreement. We both live.”

We both stay.

“...And this... marriage business?” You keep your tone detached, cautious. You’ll take your cues from him on what to do next.

“A contract, masquerading as a marriage, masquerading as a contract,” he grinned. “Dress up the lie in a little truth. Chrollo is going to know we made a deal together– I’m sure it’s already on the books. But he doesn't need to know what *kind* of deal. And it’s like you said before– me, contracting my own death? Easy to believe.”

“It will be hard to fool Chrollo,” you frown, considering it. “He’s much better at reading people than I.”

Hisoka grins at your admission. “Oh, without a doubt. He would see right through any act you put on for him.”

You almost flinch, thinking back to your last argument with him. Yes, Hisoka had made his thoughts in *that* department quite clear.

It stings a bit less, somehow. The words haven't softened in your memory, each blow hits as hard as the last. But there's something about acknowledging an insult as true that makes it easier to recover from. Perhaps this is that 'self-awareness' Hisoka always speaks so fondly about.

"But luckily," Hisoka continues, unaware or unbothered by the slow enlightenment that is overtaking you, "We have an ace up our sleeve."

"Oh? And what's that?"

Hisoka's grin turned more lecherous. "I know for a fact that Chrollo has a soft spot for you."

If you were someone completely different, you would be sputtering at that insinuation. You don't, of course, but your incredulity is no less severe.

"You're being ridiculous. We barely know each other."

"Oh you sweet, cruel little thing. He's been trying to recruit you to the Spiders for how many years now?" He laughs again at your expression. "I think he wanted to use you as an entry point of sorts. For negotiations with the Zoldyck family."

Your expression darkens. "There is no way I would ever betray my family for some gutter rat like *Chrollo Lucilfer* –"

"Of course you wouldn't, and he realized that too. But Chrollo's a thief, remember? He doesn't like being denied what he wants. The less interested you were, the more he wanted to win you over. That's the kind of game he likes to play."

You roll your eyes. "All of you and your *games* . No one here values an honest day of work anymore."

Hisoka squints at you. "Illumi… was that sarcasm?"

"Yes. Was it good?"

"Very. I'll have to properly reward you later." Hisoka tightens his grip on you as you try to roll away. "But that's still only the half of it."

You raise an eyebrow, prompting him to continue. It's a bit awkward like this, with you still sitting on top of him, but it doesn't seem like he minds. You refuse to be the one that breaks.

"Chrollo no doubt suspects that there is more to our relationship than business. A more sane man might see our past association as reason to stay away from you, but it's as I said: Chrollo likes a challenge. I think he's a bit frustrated that I got you and he didn't-"

"Nobody's *got* me-"

"- And he thinks he can steal you away. Make you a triple agent, working for him. Or at the very least try to use you against me for information– or leverage."

“Keep your enemies close,” you say thoughtfully. It might just work.

“It’s a transparent kind of ruse, you see? Both parties are ready to stab each other in the back, so they don’t need to bother hiding the knife. The more obvious it is, the better. I think Chrollo is truly confident he can turn you against me– or at the very least, he’ll want to try. All you need to do is stick to your role.”

“And that’s why you want me to trust you.”

“That’s all.” Hisoka loosens his grip on you. In a moment, you will climb off of him. In just a moment.

“What’s a little trust between friends?”

Friends. You think about what he said earlier, about knowing someone well enough to hurt them. Friends. You don’t want to leave yourself open to be hurt. But you also don’t want to lose the ability to hurt *him.*

There’s an intimacy in having that kind of power over a person.

“I’m,” you pick your words carefully, “I’m not going to apologize for what I said last time. You deserved it.”

He shrugged. “That I did. And so did you. I’ll stand by it until the day you prove me wrong.” You see the challenge in his eyes.

“I suppose I’ll do the same,” you offer, like an olive branch.

“Alright then. Till death do us part.”

Your eyebrows furrow. “You just promised *not* to die.”

“I know, it's not– it’s just something people say as part of their wedding vows.”

“Ah!” You snap your fingers as the dots connect. “I get it the whole marriage thing now. It’s a cover to play into Chrollo’s perception of us.”

“Well, yes, partially. It certainly paints a pretty picture.”

“Less suspicious if we’re seen together, or when payment is transferred.” You shoot him a sharp look. “I do expect some payment up-front. I’ll need it to cover the expenses, and it will be necessary to show my parents so that they may permit me to undertake–”

He laughs. “I expected as much. But I have a feeling your parents won’t object to you going on this voyage… considering your littlest brother will be there too.”

You jolt forward and grab the collar of his shirt. “Oh! How could I have forgot– but you’re sure that he’ll be taking the whole troupe– what if Kalluto is left behind– is that even possible–” It’s utterly inconceivable that this detail escaped you for so long.

Kalluto.

It's as if the blood inside your body is boiling. You won't let him go, you won't lose your brother again, not again, you'll make it up to him, he's not– this isn't like Killua.

Hisoka's words from back then are still ringing in your ears.

You smother people, Illumi.

No, it's not like that, it won't be like that, you refuse to make it like that–

"Illumi, calm down, ok? Calm down. All the troupe members will be there. New as he is, they would never leave one of their own behind. And I have no quarrel with your brother- he's yours to deal with. I won't interfere."

You glare at him, because it's his fault you feel this way. The uncertainty that's settled over you like a net and made it so hard to breathe– you're sure it was him. He cast it. He's the one who trapped you here.

"Don't try to pacify me." You spit out. "I'm not a child. I know what I'm doing. He's my brother, and I know him."

What was it Hisoka had said, exactly? *To know someone is to hurt them* – or wait, no. *To hurt someone is to know them? You have to know how to hurt someone before you hurt yourself?*

"Listen, Illumi– you were right before. I have no idea how your family operates; it's a complete mystery to me. I don't understand the first thing about what it's like to be a brother. I think you're all whack jobs, personally, but what do I know? Just find that ever present little voice in your head that says ' *I'm always right and Hisoka is crazy'* and use it! You look like you're about to have a panic attack."

This is a terrible time to be having this conversation. You're still sitting on him. But perhaps staying like this is in your favor? You have him pinned, technically. It is, tactically speaking, a good move.

"Shut up," you mumble. "I hate you."

"There you go."

"I hate you."

"Feel better?."

"I hate you so much."

"You know, it's a shame; I think I might actually love you."

Hisoka says this in the tone of someone saying they prefer fish over chicken for the on-flight meal. Your expression twists and your gut churns and you're reaching wildly around for the words to respond. The blood in your head that had only just begun to cool is back to boiling.

“Don’t you *dare.* ”

“Oh, is it really so awful?”

Hisoka is an insult to the word love.

“I won’t allow you to make light of such a thing.”

“Who says I’m making light of it?”

“For once in your life, Hisoka; try to take things seriously!” You try to regulate your breathing. “It’s as you said before- you have no use for ‘love.’ You don’t know what it means. Don’t ever say that to me again.”

“No?” Hisoka says as he brings his free hand to your waist, pressing you down until you can feel the proof of his arousal. “I can think of plenty of uses for the word.”

"You're *sick* ." You spit out. It’s always back to shallow, carnal pleasures with him.

"No more so than you."

"I’ll kill you."

"Is that a yes on the plan, then? Because I still haven’t gotten written approval."

“You’re such a *prick* .”

He opens his mouth in what you’re sure is about to be an innuendo, so you dig your fingers deeper into the wound you made in his shoulder earlier. It wasn’t deep, but as long as he was in a shape that could bleed…

Hisoka shudders in a language between pain and pleasure. It's disgusting. Your own insides twist with jealousy.

It’s true that sometimes you envy the easy way in which Hisoka expresses himself. The arrogance, the swagger, the disregard for consequences and rejection of sincerity. In contrast, your words have always felt weighed down on your tongue by several tons of stone.

You see no point in returning his statement. The truth is relative while the cost is astronomical.

For you, *love* is a familiar and heavy shape: one which starts and ends with family. Love is granted at birth or not at all. You don't need to tell your brothers you love them, and the absolute truth of the statement doesn't change the fact that you’re willing to stick a needle in any of their skulls. Verbalizing it, affirming it, is an insult to the depth of your family's devotion; you cannot affirm something without implying it was in-question in the first place.

What you feel for Hisoka is not what you feel for your family. Tenuous where it should be firm, turbulent where it should be steady. Pleasurable where it should be painful. Wrenched

out where it should be pushed in. You don't know if ‘love’ amounts to the giddy rush of finally, finally having someone give you their full attention and not look away.

All I want , you find yourself thinking, *is for someone to know me and hate me and stay anyway . To be repulsed by me and kiss me on the mouth because that's what people like us do to the things they hate.*

He shifts beneath you, eyes alight with something so intense that it feels like he's staring straight through into your skull. Another challenge.

To know someone is to know how to hurt them. To be loved is to be known. To love is to hurt. To hurt is to love.

In that moment you realize with absolute clarity that it doesn't matter whether it's real or good or true because it's the only thing you will ever want. Maybe it means nothing or maybe it means everything; you can’t tell the difference anymore. You can't bear to stomach anything but this, here, right now, forever. So you dig your claws in deeper and deeper and don't let go until you stain the imaginary ring on your finger with blood.

“So?”

“So.”

“Is that your response?” He laughs breathlessly, but you don’t think it’s *at* you. Your fingers are still raking over his arms like you’re trying to tear off his skin. His laughter gives way to a triumphant smile.

“Or is it this,” he says and grinds his hips upward, tightening his own fingers around your waist. You hadn’t even noticed you were hard. “Is *this* your response?”

You feel light– like at any moment you could drift away, and his hands on you are the only thing keeping you grounded. It’s… pleasant. You’re sure he’s just as conscious of the weight of your body as it pins him down. He looks more solid somehow. More real.

“Please,” you say.

“Ask,” he replies, smile wide as ever.

“Tell me again,” You groan as he brings his hips back up– no rhythm, all desperation. “Like you mean it.”

His other hand– now free from paralysis– finds the ends of your hair. Instead of taking from his usual playbook of tugging it back hard enough to sting your scalp, he just lets his fingers wind through it with reverent hunger.

“Illumi, I love you,” he laughs again, “For all the good it will do. Men like us don’t get to *fall* in love– as if by luck or accident. We have to choose to jump.”

“Hmm,” You consider the thought, imagining a cliff-face in front of you. “Do I get to know how far away the bottom is?”

“Nope,” he says, popping the syllable in his mouth. “It’s a gamble.”

“I see…” you lean over him until you’re both almost parallel to the ground, and whisper in his ear. “Is this the part where I ask if it hurts?”

“You already know the answer.” He brings his hands up to your face to part the black curtain of hair hanging over you both. “It always hurts.”

“Good,” you sigh. “I can take it.”

Hisoka kisses you in a way that is neither tender nor heated. It’s the closest thing to love he has to offer.

It is enough.

In the end, he promises to kill you quickly and you promise to kill him slowly. Both vows are intended as a mercy, a concession to the other.

They say marriage is a compromise.

Chapter End Notes

welcome to the climax of the fic!!?!?! last chapter is gonna be an epilogue, so we'll be officially wrapping up next sunday. what a journey it has been!!!

this chapter went through a shit-ton of rewrites, largely due to the fact that it was actually the first one i ever wrote (yeah. sixteen chapters of setup it would seem) and the whole impetus came specifically from me imagining how the proposal scene might go... which morphed into a character study of these two freaks' differing, largely counterbalancing(!) views on love and commitment. and then new chapters came out and we got the hisolenov reveal while receiving radiosilence (suspicious) from illumi. and then i started re-reading old chapters and long meta posts on tumblr dot com concerning their relationship, which somewhat shifted the way i thought of them both together and as individuals, and before i knew it.... i was looking at an entirely different beast of a fic.

the original draft played the "hisoka wants to kill and be killed by illumi" thing straight, and then after months of contemplation i started feeling strongly that hey, actually, I don't think Hisoka is interested in dying. I don't think he's interested in sabotaging his revenge scheme with Chrollo by throwing a wildcard into the fray, either (hence, mole Illumi is born). I may write something exploring this more in the future, but I think Hisoka dying was a really REALLY pivotal moment for his character- a bit of a wake-up call, you could say. The way I see it, Hisoka's worldview was centered around this unshakable idea of him being the strongest, being unbeatable and able to adapt to any situation... which Chrollo ultimately shattered. Hisoka IS fallable, he CAN die, and he WILL find himself in situations he can't get out of by brute force or sheer strength of will. He BARELY made it out alive, and definitely not unscathed. I think he wants revenge on Chrollo for this exact reason. I think he's feeling true *anger* for the first time in a long, long time, and he needs someone to direct it at. If he can't build back this unshakeable, ultra-confident self-image, then he can at least destroy the person who robbed him of it.

Meanwhile Illumi's own sense of self has been eroding; the standoff with Killua and Alluka becomes the proverbial nail in the coffin. Illumi, who sees himself as always in control of those below him and subservient to those above, has gone against the explicit wishes of his father, only to be defied by the brother and sister he saw as pawns. Now he's given himself a new target- Nanika, and the power she wields- seemingly more for himself than the good of the family. Biggg priority shift. I mean, it's just identity crisis central over here (and hoh booy don't even get me *started* on Chrollo,... Mr. Existential Dread over here is having a terrible time but that's a story for another day). With all these deconstructions of the self going on, well, eventually something's gotta give! In this case, it's the walls hisoillu had kept standing between each other. It's not exactly character development in the positive, upward mobility sense... but I suppose some people have to learn how to be selfish before they can learn to be themselves. And only then, later down the line, can they (perhaps) learn to be *better*.

or maybe not! ☺🙃

> "Wait... if you want to live... and I want to live... then who's flying the plane?!!?!" (intrinsic-character-flaws-turned-plot-mechanism seeking to tear us apart, which we both know is what made us doomed from the beginning)

Chapter 18: three-card monté (epilogue)

Chapter Summary

"Three-Card-Monté:" *an infamous card trick- also known as "Follow the Lady."*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You receive a package in the mail a few weeks later from an untraceable address- and you *did* try. You are, after all, still a professional: and a challenge is a challenge. Inside it you find a business card, and what looks to be some kind of candy ring-pop: the sort you could buy dirt-cheap in a backwater town convenience store.

Upon closer inspection, the ring seemed to be solid silver, expertly crafted to look like cheap plastic. The candy mounted upon it concealed a genuine 24-carat blue diamond- he was never one to do things by halves. Unfortunately, the gemstone was protected by a solid layer of rock candy- which you didn't dare bite through, in fear of your teeth accidentally grazing the diamond.

No, this was meant to be done the old-fashioned way. Hisoka probably got a gag out of sending you something you'd have to put in your mouth; (if you were a pettier man, you would pawn it off and send him the receipt). As it stands, you see no harm in slipping it on your finger and snapping a photo for later. You have your sights set on a wedding album.

You're about to toss the cardboard box into a nearby bin when something catches your eye. Upon closer inspection, you realize that the slip of paper you mistook for a postal receipt was actually a playing card. A faded Queen of Hearts winks up at you through her water-damaged edges.

Scribbled on the back like an afterthought is a small note:

For better or for worse,

Richer or poorer,

In sickness and in health,

Till death do us part.

-♡

A smile splits your face from ear to ear. The package, now discarded, falls to the ground. Card held tight between your fingers, you stride across the glossy floor of your penthouse suite and throw open the curtains to let the light in.

Very well, then-- said the Hunter to the Lady--

One more game.

Chapter End Notes

woah. this is the first longfic i've ever fully finished- although hopefully not the last- and while it was a real trek i just want to express my sincere gratitude towards anyone and everyone who's dropped a comment along the way. there truly is no better motivator. now that things are slowing down at work i have more time on my hands, and hope to go through and respond to each person individually- you deserve it!!! it genuinely makes me emotional that i get to write words on a page and someone out there gets to enjoy them.

i've got a few things planned for the future- finishing up my meteor city fic, for one, but also all things BOAT are now on the table. nothing makes me run my mouth quite like the succession war and i have thoughts and feelings about morena (to no one's surprise) that are practically bursting out of my brain. while i focus on other things, feel free to check out my previous (short) hisoillu oneshots and see if there's anything you like!

this author's note is already way too long for such a small chapter but yeah once again thank you all for coming on this journey with me. may your crops be bountiful and your yaoi unhinged <3

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